

Year A – Proper 23 “Don’t go to Church!”

“Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his mercy endures forever.” (Psalm 106:1)

Today I’m going to give you some good advice – Don’t go to church! It’s time to stop going to church. It’s time for something different.

Maybe that’s what Aaron was thinking, too. He’s been with Moses on the mountaintop and he’s led the people in building the ark that will hold the tablets of the covenant and now they are waiting for Moses to return from his 40 days and 40 nights on the mountain. He should be bringing the tablets with him. The people grow tired of waiting for Moses return.

Perhaps Aaron thought that having the people give up their own gold was a good thing. But clearly forming an idol (Baal) was a mistake. And worshipping it was going too far. Sometimes I wonder if we’ve made idols out of our church buildings. I wonder if we forget what worship is really all about.

The Israelites eventually develop elaborate sacrifices for God later in their journey together, scripture repeatedly says that this is not how Yahweh wants to relate to the people. The psalmist will pray: *“In sacrifice and offering you take no pleasure . . . Burnt-offering and sin offering you have not required.” (Ps. 40:7-8)* *“The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit. A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” (Ps 51:18)* And Ezekiel will testify: *“I will replace your heart of stone with heart of flesh” (11:9).*

Worship is not about going to church. It’s about a change of heart through prayer. Through worship we are transformed into the people of God over and over again. Is that what we’re doing on Sunday mornings? What are we here for?

In the weekly publication, *Christian Century*, Rodney Clapp writes of his experience traveling in Egypt which is primarily a Muslim country. He visited a variety of Coptic and Protestant churches in Cairo and Alexandria and in the country villages. Everywhere that he went, Christians he met asked him, “Where do you pray?” In the US the question would be “Where do you go to church?”. As he lived with the question he discovered a more meaningful way to think about and understand his own practice of worship and prayer.

“Where do you go to church?” expresses an individualistic attendance at some event. “Where do you pray?” suggests the place where one gathers to be open to the presence and life of God – to listen, to speak, to absorb, and yes, to be transformed.

Isn’t that worship is really all about? In prayer we open ourselves in the midst of the gathered community in silence before God. We listen. We say or sing our praise together. We pour out our hearts in petition. We confess our sins. We receive the spiritual substance of Christ in consecrated bread and wine. Ultimately, both Jewish and Christian worship would focus on coming together for a meal (Shabbat, Holy Communion).

Jesus goes even further in the parable that we heard read this morning. It’s not just a meal in which we are gathered and transformed in God, it’s a banquet. It’s a feast. And we have all been invited, the good and the bad. But we don’t always participate. Sometimes we just “go to church”. You could argue that that’s better than not being here at all. But the parable suggests otherwise. Jesus makes it clear that it is not just our physical presence, that this feast is about. It’s about our transformation, our readiness to be “married” to Christ, to put that relationship at

the center of our lives. If we just show up – “go to church” – we may find ourselves on the outside looking in. We will not have a wedding garment.

What about that person who comes to the wedding banquet without a wedding garment? How is that part of the reign of God that includes people, both good and bad, no matter who they are or what they have done?

The wedding garment of the reign of God is a transformed heart and life. Such a garment brings a true sense of peace and confidence in the goodness of a life lived in relationship with God. In Jesus’ parable, the king says “how did you get in here?” because if someone does not have at least the beginning of the garment, they are not likely to say “yes” to the banquet. Saying “yes” means “I am ready. I want to live a transformed life.” It didn’t make sense for the man to be there. He was just “going to church”.

A woman went into a marketplace, looked around, and saw a sign that read “God’s Fruit Stand.” “Thank goodness. It’s about time,” the woman said to herself. She went inside and she said, “I would like a perfect banana, a perfect cantaloupe, a perfect strawberry, and a perfect peach.” God, who was behind the counter, shrugged and said, “I’m sorry. I sell only seeds.”¹

We are all invited to God’s great banquet, and we are to bring the seeds of God’s life within us. We become part of the banquet. Our hearts, our commitment to a life that in which we work for justice and peace and the benefit of those in need; our desire for a life that is centered in the Divine which is so much a part of our nature –these are the seeds that God gives us to be nurtured and brought to fullness of life by what we do (the garments we put on every day). When we come together in prayer, the seeds of God’s life are watered, fertilized and exposed to the light of Christ which makes them grow.

St. Augustine said that *“the proper wedding garment is love that comes from a pure heart”*.² We offer and pledge our hearts to Christ in prayer and gain a new life every time we gather in worship.

So, where do **you** pray? In your car, at your desk, in your bed, on the water, on the mountain top and yes, in this Chapel of St. Mary here in Northeast Harbor. This is where today we are all formed together, where the seeds of God’s life are nurtured in and among us.

And please **don’t come to church!** Come to prayer. Come to worship. This is the place where the feast is to be found and the worship of God is real and gives your life into the world.

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¹ “God’s Fruit Stand” from *The Legend of the Bells and Other Tales*, by John Shea, p. 53.

² Ancient Christian Commentary on Scriptures, New Testament, Volume Ib, p.147, Intervarsity Press.