

## **The Gift of the Church – Hebrews 10:19-25**

This morning we celebrate the gift of the church. Certainly we rejoice with our new members who have said, “This is my church family, and I will support the work and ministry of my church.”

But we also celebrate the gift of the church as we prepare to say “goodbye” to each other and look to a new chapter in the life of this church and in the life of Lise and myself. It was the gift of the church that brought my family to Nanaimo 18 years ago, bringing us to a small but dedicated group of Christians. I had dark hair then and carried a lot less “baggage” around the midriff! My children were in middle school and high school, and Lise was still a stay at home mom.

And my first Sunday in Nanaimo we held our first service in our newly rented hall – the funeral home on Wallace Street. I still remember the two way mirror that ran the length of one wall which made it look like we had twice as many people in the sanctuary as we did! We needed that! What an adventure from there to here...

And it is all because God gave us the gift of the church. Most of you here today were not a part of that small core that called Lise and I to come to be their pastor. Most of you have come into the church over the past eighteen years, drawn into the fellowship of the church because something wonderful happens when God’s people assemble. We have “grown together in love” and as you look around you, you will see the faces of people you really care about.

The church is a gift from God. The church is not the invention of people. It is from the very heart and mind of God, established in the Old Testament people of God called the nation of Israel, and fulfilled in the gathering of the followers of Jesus Christ. Jesus himself said, “I will build my church...” It is His church. We are His people.

I truly believe that is what the writer of Hebrews was getting at in Hebrews 10:19-25. Now one of the great mysteries of the New Testament is the question, “Who wrote the book of Hebrews?” Many would quickly say, “It was Paul,” for it carries the same theological weight as Paul’s epistles. Yet the style is so different from Paul’s usual style, people wonder if one of the other disciples might be involved in the writing of this book. We may not know who the human author is, but we know who inspired these words: God through the Holy Spirit...

“All scripture is inspired by God...”

So listen to what God says to us in these verses. – READ HEBREWS 10:19-25

The author is taking us back to the tabernacle or to the temple, where the people of God once assembled to worship God and offer sacrifices for forgiveness and to give thanks. Here the invitation is for the “brothers and sisters” (v. 19) to enter the Most Holy Place because of Jesus. This is an invitation for Christians to gather in the presence of God for worship.

Walk back with me nearly 4000 years to the wilderness just north of Egypt. There you will find a ragtag crowd of people following a man named Moses. They just came out of slavery in Egypt and were moving towards a promised land where they would live free. This crowd of humanity, likely over 1 million in number, represented God's people. They descended from Abraham, who was called by God to be the father of a great nation. Well, there were a lot of people but they certainly were not a great nation yet. After 400 years of living as slaves this crowd no longer knew how to live in freedom.

But God would help them.

These were to be God's people, so God made Himself known to them. Though God had appeared to Moses in a burning bush and revealed his presence through a pillar of fire and smoke in the wilderness, the time when God truly revealed himself to His people was the day they assembled at the foot of Mount Sinai. As the people assembled at the base of the mountain, God showed up, and revealed himself through fire and smoke and a voice that all could hear. It was a day when there was no doubt that God was real. He showed up as the people assembled.

This life changing, history changing, event would be known by the Israelites as "the day of Assembly." (cf. Deut. 4:10, 9:10, 10:4, 18:16) God revealed himself as His people assembled. Though things did not go well for Israel that day because they chose false gods rather than the true God who was revealing Himself there, wouldn't it be good to somehow remember that day, and experience the presence of God again?

It has been suggested that this is the very reason the Tabernacle was given by God,<sup>1</sup> that tent structure that sat at the middle of the Israelite camp where the people could assemble and experience the presence of God. The people would gather for worship there, to hear the instruction from God through Moses, or even receive the chastisement from God. But the tabernacle became the place of assembly, and when God's people assemble, God shows up.

in the Greek version of the Old Testament the word used for "assembly" was "ecclesia". Now turn to the New Testament and we find that God still shows up when His people are gathered, as Matthew 18:20 reminds us: "Where two or three are gathered in my name there I am in the midst of them!" The New Testament was originally written mainly in Greek, and guess what word was chosen to describe the gathering of people called the church? "Ecclesia" That is right – we are the assembled ones. And what happens when God's people assemble together? God shows up.

In our passage in Hebrews we are reminded that there was a time people could not enter the presence of God due to their sinfulness. Sinful people cannot stand in the presence of a holy God. But Jesus came, and through his sacrificial death, he made a way so that we can be forgiven and our sins could be washed from our lives. We can be made holy by the cleansing

---

<sup>1</sup> James G. Samra, *The Gift of the Church: How God designed the Local Church to Meet our Needs as Christians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), p. 24 (Kindle)

work of God through the Holy Spirit. We can now enter the most holy place of the tabernacle, that place once reserved only for the High Priest, because Jesus made us holy..

This is why, in verse 22, we are encouraged to “draw near to God.” We can come into the presence of God. And as is typical of the book of Hebrews, the invitation is for us to come together, not alone. Hebrews seldom speaks of a solitary faith – just you and Jesus. It speaks of the community going together, and in this case, going together into the presence of God.

What do we call the assembled people of God, who encounter the presence of God as they come together? The church. As James Samra says in his book, “The Gift of the Church,”

*“God intends for us to experience his presence in a unique and powerful way through the church, because God is uniquely present when the church assembles.”<sup>2</sup>*

Think for a moment about the times you experienced the presence of God in a powerful way. I suspect many of those times have been in church services. I have seen people healed in church services, saved from their sins, set free from strongholds in their lives and broken relationships restored. I have seen people come in with their heads hanging low, and leave with joy on their faces. When God’s people gather, when we assemble together for worship and fellowship, God shows up and ministers to us in wonderful ways.

We have seen that again and again and again over the past 18 years. We want to get to church, not just because our friends are there, but because we know God will be there and we will be blessed in some way by His presence.

Verse 23 says, *“Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.”* God promised to be with us as we gather and we know He is true to His word!

The church is God’s gift to us because it is there, in the assembly of His people, that he makes Himself known to us. *“No where is God as present as he is in the midst of his gathered church.”<sup>3</sup>*

The Psalmist said, *“Taste and see that the Lord is good.”* (Psalm 34:8) You will never know how good the presence of God until you spend time with the assembled. If you stay home, you will never experience God as He wants you to.

Now our passage does not end with the invitation to assemble and draw near. The second great gift of the church is that it brings people together in community like no other institution can. As someone has said, *“In the church God redeems our diversity and draws all men and women to himself.”<sup>4</sup>*

Our text goes on to encourage believers to spur one another on towards love and good deeds. In the fellowship of the redeemed, who often do not act like the redeemed, Christians grow and mature and become more Christlike. Yes, within that great collection of diverse people the Holy

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 24 Kindle

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 18 Kindle

<sup>4</sup> Ibid 20

Spirit moves and teaches us how to appreciate each other, even with our differences. He teaches us how to listen, really listen, to the pains of others. The Spirit teaches us how to be generous not only with our money but also with our time, our energy, our lives. Why? Because, "Love does that."

Our lives are shaped by our fellowship together. I would not be where I am today in my Christian walk if it was not for the church. I do not think only of the church that shaped me as a boy and as a teen, but I think of the Nanaimo Church of the Nazarene that has shaped me in so many ways, stretching my faith, exposing my selfishness or pride, encouraging me to keep going when I was tired. I think of who we are as a church today, compared to the church we were 18 years ago, and I know God has been at work in a wonderful way.

This fellowship, we call the church, could have exploded, or imploded, at any time, but God shows up and uses the church for his glory. God loves to see His people united together in love, working together in the community, encouraging each other and embracing anyone and everyone who walks in the doors of the church. The community looks on and says, "My, how they love one another." And God smiles. We give Him all the glory.

Friends, the church is God's gift for our benefit, that we might know his presence, and the church is for His glory, that the world will see His love in action.

That is why our passage ends with these words:

*"... Not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching." (v. 25).*

If the church is God's gift to us to experience His presence and to bring glory to Himself, then why would we ever miss a chance to gather? How could we stay home if we had the chance to attend a worship service? How could we look God in the eye and say, "I was tired, so I slept in" when He gave us the gift of the church?

The Nanaimo Church of the Nazarene is an incredible gift from God – to me, to you, to our city, to our District! Don't take it for granted. No matter who stands in this pulpit, when you assemble, ready to worship, God will be here, and your gathering will bring glory to Him.

Thank God for the gift of the church. Amen?