

ATTENDANCE

Sometimes I ask myself if I have learned yet to come when I am called. What is good for the dogs and the children is good for me too, as long as I know my true Master.

In this season of history, the world seems to be spilling over with fanatics. Across the world, in every society and religion, there has been a strong shift toward conservative extremism. Fanaticism can shade quickly into terrorism, and terrorism has taken the place of communism as the bogeyman of our time. One of the ramifications of this reality is that many people are more suspicious than ever of any religious commitment. In a world that has endless defenses against commitment, this adds a handy wild card to the game. People can feel noble about staying uninvolved on the grounds that they are fighting fanaticism. That is quite a fantastic stretch, to be sure, but many people seem able to make it. The truth is that fanaticism's only antidote is a genuine, committed faith. People obedient to Jesus do not kill people who disagree with them. (People obedient to cult leaders who talk about Jesus *do* sometimes kill people who disagree with them; idolatry is always dangerous, especially when mixed with ignorance.)

In any case, just as love is the only antidote for lust, just as faith is the only antidote for fear, just as humility is the only antidote for pride – so is a deep and studied religious commitment the only antidote for fanaticism. To suggest that fanaticism can be cured by being irreligious or staying neutral is like fighting fire by doing nothing. It is an invitation to more fire. Humans do not like living *without* hope; the choice is between false hope and genuine hope. To try to stay irreligious – or hopeless – is an invitation to emptiness. And if you leave the emptiness there long enough, it creates a vacuum, which is precisely the condition for a “blow-up” that invites the fire of fanaticism. (Matthew 12:43; Luke 11:24)

That's a strange introduction to a sermon, don't you think? But we are in strange waters. I believe that the best way to grow a church is to BE a church. It's not the fastest way. It's not the biggest way. It's the *best* way, because then, no matter what else happens, we get to concentrate on what we really care about. We get to experience what we really want to be about all along the way. So we are never going to concentrate on promotion – we are going to trust in attraction. I am not going to find

fancy ways to talk or cajole anybody into coming here. You are going to draw them, by the way you live – by the way you think, and choose, and pray.

So we must look to our faith more than to our techniques. That is, we must restore and, where necessary, renew our *discipleship*, our *covenant* bonds, our *commitment* – all the concepts that those who have experienced them love most, and those who have not hate most. Moreover, I'm the one who needs to line it out because I'm the preacher. But you hardly know me; besides, it cannot be *me* you are doing it for or it won't work. Yet the renewal must begin right away because it takes time to grow things genuinely, and we need to get moving. Strange waters? Yes. So I have to call for your commitment. Your first reaction will be to hang back – to wait and see. If very many of you do that for very long, we won't get anywhere.

So I thought I'd better start right out talking about fanaticism. Some of you will want to use that as a way to duck. If you want or need to duck, I want you to be able to. But right now, I am looking for the people who don't want to duck, who are maybe even tired of it – who are eager and longing to move on as a church. There is no church without commitment.

The Christian WAY of Life is made up of a series of spiritual disciplines. That is why we are called “disciples.” (A disciple is one who keeps the disciplines of the Master.) Today I want to talk about attendance, one of the oldest and most basic of all the spiritual disciplines: Show up. Come when you are called. Be there when the faith family gathers.

We started mocking and deriding and laughing at this discipline way back in the 1950s. In the '60s, we threw it out entirely as unworthy of free, thinking individuals. In the '70s, we tried to survive the mayhem of having lost this critical part of the covenant. In the '80s, we started trying to bring back, in new forms or with new words, some of the principles and precepts that light our Way. Where we are now, it's too soon to say.

Attendance was a big, moral issue where I grew up. A Catholic who did not go to Mass on Sunday was in trouble. It was a matter for serious guilt, and needed confession and absolution. “Father forgive me, for I have sinned. I did not go to church last Sunday.” We have laughed at

this and derided it since, but it was no laughing matter back then. When I began my ministry in the late 1950s in Paxton, Massachusetts, I could hardly go anywhere in town without finding myself embroiled in the “Protestant Confessional.” Everywhere I went, the first thing out of anybody’s mouth, if they had not been in church last Sunday, was their excuse. I got sick of it. I wanted to talk about more interesting things. It made me feel bad that all these grown people would assume I was judging them and feel guilty enough to lie to me on a regular basis. The point is, everybody felt guilty if they did not attend church. They knew it was an important spiritual discipline. They knew the church could not be strong and faithful if they did not show up. Many, at that time, did not feel guilty enough to get faithful, but they felt guilty enough to feel bad about it. It was, remember, near the time when all such disciplines would soon be shattered. Shortly afterward, we moved into a new era: those who felt like it should come if and when they felt like it.

That makes perfect sense in a society of free and independent individuals, if each one is acting as a free agent. If, within that context, we are constrained only by the laws of economics or the courtesies that sometimes cause us to announce our intentions or our whereabouts, then well and good; those who feel like it should come if and when they feel like it. If you are married, with children, you are not a free and independent agent in the same way. You have covenant bonds. You are a free and independent agent who has *chosen covenant bonds* on purpose as a way to accomplish things that nobody can accomplish alone. It is the great dilemma of all civilization from the dawn of history: Do I live alone, or shall I make alliance? My choices and my strength are extremely limited if I live alone. But if I make alliance with anybody, what if they betray me? Then I am worse off than if I had stayed alone. The terror and the hope of all society everywhere is alliance – covenant. We can do amazing things if we get together, but what about betrayal? Once made, covenant bonds cannot come and go at whim. Their very function and purpose are dependent upon their being in effect, and on our being able to count on them.

Do you and can you count on your fellow members in this church for anything? We must make and keep some commitments or we are nothing to, or for, each other. No Christian is ever a free and independent agent. That would be a contradiction in terms. A Christian has allegiance to a different Kingdom, and has sworn obedience to a Leader/Lord considered greater than any human on earth. Every baptized Christian,

by definition, is under covenant bonds that swear allegiance unto death. Surely you have struggled with it: All true Christianity is fundamentally fanatical ... *unless, of course*, JESUS REALLY IS THE CHRIST. In which case, Christianity is merely the sane and logical response to recognizing Jesus' identity. "*Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!'*" (John 20:28)

In any case, once the pressure for attendance eased up, our society stopped attending church in droves. I loved it! It was wonderful to preach to people who came because they *wanted* to be there. The atmosphere of the church was dramatically improved. We could feel and taste what was wrong with a system trying to run off of guilt and fear. If anything I say today makes you think I want to return to those "good old days" when the churches were filled but for the wrong reasons, you are very much mistaken.

It was not only the church, you realize. The family also lost the precept of attendance. People no longer showed up for family meals or for family gatherings in the way they had previously. At first it felt freeing. People could come and go without all the old obligations dogging their steps. People would actually get up from the table without asking permission from whoever sat at its head. Then there became fewer and fewer chances to build the family. They were never together. The bonds weakened, the honor was neglected. Everything else came first. Soon parents had less and less authority, even over the affairs of their own homes and children. And the scattering and the disintegration spread like a plague across the land. Oh, not all of it was due to a lack of attendance, but a lot of it was. If you don't have to be home for dinner every night or be accountable to your family for your day, it makes an enormous difference in attitudes and actions across the board (or lack of a "board").

The repercussions of the loss of the principle of attendance were felt everywhere. It became acceptable to be late. That is, it was now okay to squander each other's life and time. A late term paper used to be an automatic "F." I mean five minutes late. Now many term papers can drag in six months to a year late and not even be marked down a grade. Some classrooms have become a shambles. I hear people bragging about getting a passing grade in a course without ever attending a single class. That makes sense if the classroom is no longer a place of learning, which is frequently the case. But the loss is troublesome. The fact is that a classroom can be a place of enormous, even transforming, excitement.

But not if the class never forms into a class – and that requires steady attendance.

Does it matter if you come to church? I know you know it does. You even know some ways it matters that I will not mention. Even one of the most important reasons of all, I will not mention. But on a very simple, realistic level: Does it matter if you come to church? Does your attendance matter?

Jesus tells this parable about a man who invites people to his banquet. They don't have to do anything, they don't have to bring anything, they just have to show up. Failure to show up means no banquet. Then nothing can happen. Often, a banquet has a purpose; something important comes out of it. We are never told the purpose of this banquet. It is lost in all the excuses – in all the competing purposes and activities. We know Jesus' parable style well enough to suspect that this man giving the banquet is representing God inviting us to some extremely important gathering. It will be the beginning of something amazing. From other teachings and parables, we suspect that this banquet is going to announce the Coming Kingdom and invite us into the whole affair: pilgrimage, spiritual warfare, assignment of tasks, the sealing of friendships – the whole business.

However, the parable is accurate in never showing us any of the real purpose or dimensions of the banquet because that is all cut off by our excuses, by our preference for our own affairs – by our lack of attendance. This is a parable about nothing happening *because* we wouldn't show up. The parable says quite eloquently that we will never know what we missed. That is, in fact, the whole point and message of this parable: We will never know what we missed if we do not bother to show up. Most people in our time will never experience life in Christian Community because they cannot find a group of people willing to take on the disciplines of the Christian Life. (Well, the parable is also saying that if the Jews won't show up, God will find Gentiles who will. But if we apply that message to our time, the implications are so heartbreaking I don't think I can talk about it.)

In any case, this parable is all the more poignant because Jesus is working to put together a movement that must culminate in a confrontation in Jerusalem at Passover time. If those who believe in Him do not show up in Jerusalem in time to support Him, then all will be lost. **No leader can accomplish anything if he cannot get attendance.**

You don't have to jump to Jesus to figure that out. Think of a mother trying to shape a home of loving support, but nobody shows up when they are supposed to. Think of any business. Don't be fooled by telephones and computers. They have only given us new ways to be in attendance. Even if you own a dog who will not come when you call, you can comprehend the principle.

"Others will be there; it doesn't matter if I show up. They don't need me. Nobody will miss me." I have used this excuse a thousand times. The only times it ever feels okay is when I truly do not consider the event important in the first place. It would be more honest (clearer) to just call it that way up front. If a thing is important to me, it is important for me to show up. Who misses me or doesn't miss me misses the point. I will be absent if I do not attend – *that* is the point. I will not be part of it – *I will miss it* – if I do not show up. If I do not want to miss the banquet, I have to show up. If the banquet or the meeting is about Kingdom business or about building up the fellowship of Kingdom people – and if I love the Kingdom – then I do not want to miss it.

Having said that, I think we need to add – in our time when it is so often forgotten – that it does matter whether or not *you* show up. No matter how many others come, it still matters whether or not *you* show up. Christianity is never about crowds. Christianity is about individuals. No matter how many individuals gather together, Christianity is still about individuals – and every single one of you counts. Every single one of you is irreplaceable. The church on earth, and the Kingdom beyond, can and will survive without any one of us, and even without all of us. That does *not* mean we can be replaced, that we will not be missed, that anybody else can fill the spot if we leave it empty, or that God is not upset when any child is missing or will not respond.

Well, that's getting too close to Gospel, and I said simple and practical. Here is simple and practical: Does it matter if you go to church? Here are three points:

1.) Your attendance is bearing witness to what is important in your life. It does not mean you like every sermon or agree with the words of every hymn. It means you believe that God's people gathering to worship – that the life of the church – is important enough to command your life and time. I know it sounds elementary, but it is actually elemental. Every person who heads for church on Sunday morning (or any other time) is making an announcement. Somebody thinks this is important. They are

here instead of somewhere else. That matters. That makes a statement. And some people will always hear that statement, though you will seldom know who or when.

Just when the opportunity to witness might get more interesting, many people opt out. “My relatives are visiting, so I won’t be in church this Sunday.” “I have friends here from out of town, so I won’t see you in church Sunday.” Hey, I’m intelligent enough to know there are legitimate exceptions to every rule. I don’t even want you to *try* to carry a witness that is too heavy for your commitment. That will backfire every time. But have you thought it through? If God’s people do not act like worship and the life of the church are truly important to them because friends and relatives show up, then when and how are you going to tell them? It’s not like they are going to throw you to the lions. It’s not like they cannot come with you. And if they don’t want to come to church with you, say “fine” and give them a piece of paper and a pencil, tell them that while you’re gone they can write down a list of things that are as important and valuable to them as Jesus and His church are to you, and when you get home you can compare notes. Wouldn’t that be fun!

2.) You have to be together to be known, and to get to know each other. Jesus works out of the power of friendship. We cannot just get closer to *Him* – He requires that we also know each other.

3.) On this third point, I want to save you any harangue and skip over all the eloquent and irrefutable persuasion, even though I think I have such arguments ready and waiting. Instead, let me tell you what I wish:

I wish that every single Sunday morning, when you get into the car, before you start the engine, you would pause for a moment of reflection. Some of you are alone; some of you are in a family group. Doesn’t matter. Whoever is driving is responsible. Before you start the engine, you get everybody quiet. Then you say: *“Lord, we are doing this – we are going to church – because we love You. We ask You to be with us and to help us to both worship and learn. But we also know that You call us to church for a reason. We believe that You are sending some other person to church today just because You want us to talk to them. Help us to be watchful and alert today, that we may spot that person. And give us the willingness to go talk to them.”*

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If every single one of you comes to church every Sunday with that agenda fresh in your minds, do you know what would happen to us? We cannot begin to imagine it. But one thing is certain: Jesus would start sending people here because He would know we would pay attention to them.

I'm just getting warmed up, but I have to wrap this up, so two more things:

A.) I want to appeal to you to make and sign a thirty-mile covenant to each other and to Jesus for the rest of this year. You will pray about it first, I hope. You may have to modify it to match your own situation. It says:

"I will be in my church to worship and to learn and to participate every Sunday morning, unless I am more than thirty miles away. This, my Lord, is my pledge of attendance, and I make it because I love you and want to be part of Your People."

Some of you will need to make the miles longer or shorter to fit your circumstances. Some of you may need to add health considerations. I just want to see how many of you are really willing to help "push up the sky."

B.) And finally, speaking of attendance, what about the people who are not here today? I do not mean to imply that they are recalcitrant; some of them attend as much as any of us, and maybe they are more than thirty miles away right now. Nevertheless, we need and want them to consider these things and to make the thirty-mile covenant along with us. How will they hear about it? Well, they will hear about it if you note their absence and take or send this sermon to them. Thank you.