



“Why I’m at Church on the Last Sunday of Summer Vacation”

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Eden United Church of Christ
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Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
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Psalm 103:1-5
The gospel of Luke 13: 11-13
Excerpts of Hebrews 12:18-19, 23-24, 28-29***

So here we are, the last Sunday in August. For those of us with children—and given that we have so many current and former teachers and school administrators in our congregation who’s annual rhythms are tied to the school year calendar—the most notable thing about this Sunday is that school starts next week. And it’s not just that I’ve got school-aged kids or a husband who taught for 30 years in this cycle. Even though I’ve been out of school now for at least 10, okay 20 years, it seems the rhythms of the academic calendar are hardwired into my bio-rhythms. Even though my work seems to go into high-gear in the early summer, I always get that giddy thrill in early June as school’s out—as if I too get to sleep in and watch TV for a week. And even though I long ago gave up book reports and term papers, I now find myself girding up my energy—and my school supplies—for the long journey of the school year.

So, here we are on the last Sunday of summer vacation—and we are in church.

Now, many of you know my kids, Sage and Maya. They are wonderful, terrific kids; but of course, they are kids, so it won’t surprise you to learn that there are rare occasions when I hear—just like my parents did when I was 12—a plaintive, wistful “do we have to go to church this Sunday?” And it may not surprise you to know that, given that they are both in those early adolescent years where we all begin to wonder if our parents really know what they are doing, they do occasionally, lovingly, wonder aloud, after I tell them that yes, we’re going, this Sunday, “Why.....?”

So, today I want to talk a little bit about why I'm at church on Sunday morning: in particular, this Sunday morning on the last weekend of summer vacation. It just so happens that I've been thinking a lot about this question of why I go to church, not just this Sunday, but in general. What's prompted this period of reflection for me is two things. First, as Arlene mentioned a few weeks ago in her sermon, I'm part of a little team chartered by cabinet to think about what we need next for our church in our education and spiritual development offerings that will support our continued growth as a congregation and as individuals in our faith journey. And second, Tom and I, together with the Cowicks, the Millers and other parents of middle schoolers, have decided to help Jeanne Strauss out in her quest for Sunday School teachers, and together we have committed to lead our middle school youth program.

As I've been participating in this task team and as we plan for our middle school program—and as I listen to the voices of my children asking “Why?”—I've found myself going back to this essential question, why am I here at church? Why are we here together? What am I here to learn, to experience, to do, to be, to share?

Now, before we get too far into this question, I need to put a couple of disclaimers out there. First, nothing in this sermon is intended to make any of us think that going to church every Sunday is the only thing I think is valuable to do on Sunday morning. As any of you who have been here this month know, my family hasn't been here at all this month, because we were on our family vacation—we took a fantastic camping trip to Northern California and Oregon and had just a fabulous time. And any of you who know us know that, like all families in this day and age, we are balancing work, and family time, and sports, and birthday parties, and personal time—and we do miss Sundays occasionally, when one of these other commitments intersects with this time slot. But it's even beyond that. As I share today about why I am at church this Sunday and many Sundays, I need to make sure you know that I really don't think—and I doubt if any of you think—that God is more present here on Sunday morning than on the soccer field, on the hiking trail, or on my couch with a cup of coffee and the Sunday paper.

Second, nothing in this sermon is intended to make you feel that as I share why I'm at here church this Sunday or any Sunday, that I'm assuming you should feel the same way. One of the most precious things about the culture here at Eden is that we really do mean it when we say who ever you are and where ever you are on life's journey, you're welcome here. So I assume that if you were preaching this sermon about why you are at church this morning, you—indeed, each of us—would have our own nuanced answer to the question. And it's not just what we hold in common that makes Eden work. It's just as much about that diversity of experience, our different perceptions, our diverse vocabulary, and various motivations as what we hold in common.

And yet, here we are...here I am, with you at church on the last Sunday of summer vacation. And my kids are sitting there, and I can hear their question, and my own heart's searching, why? Why am I here with all the competing possible ways I could spend my time this morning? Why do I bring my kids to church? Why do I think it's important that we gather here together and do these rituals of worship, pray, sing songs, laugh and cry together? What am I here to learn, to experience, to do, to be, to share?

Simply put, I am here today because I yearn to experience God's presence in my life and I want you to experience it too. I want us to feel the touch of the divine, what is beyond this time and place, what is eternal, what defeats death. I want us to talk about, sing about, pray about, think about what words cannot contain and what can barely be described. I want us to be reminded of the power of love and forgiveness—and how the touch of the living Christ can heal us in ways we never knew possible. I want us to share our praise and our doubt, our wonder and our skepticism. I want us to learn together how to live out of the power of love and grace—how to see ourselves as God sees us and, through the eyes of that everlasting love, see one another. I want to be amazed at how God works through our very humanity, through our impatience, our boldness, our imbalance, our confusion, our singular vision, our paralyzing fear, our indignation, our service, our suffering, and our triumph—just like God worked through Jesus, who in every way shared

the limitations our humanity and who in every way showed us how very divine it is to human. I want us to be reminded that our life matters—that all life matters—and that God has given to us the sacred trust of nurturing life, in all its forms.

And I want purposely remind myself that I am not alone. See, all of what I just talked about is available to every human being—I don't think you have to be at Eden church or any church or indeed in any religion of any kind to know the deep truth, truer than any truth that is under my feeble and limited vocabulary to describe it. But, the reality—indeed the most challenging mystery of human existence—is how very easy it seems to be to live in the midst of God's presence in everything, in every breadth, and yet forget. Sometimes my experience feels fleeting and small, and disconnected. Like the kids with the train set, I just have my one piece of track, my one car. I don't know how it fits or where it fits. Or worse yet, I forget it all together.

I'm here because I don't want to be alone. I want to remember—I want us to remember and renew together the truth of God's love and grace and learn together the meaning of that in our day-to-day lives.

And I also want to remember that we are not the first, the only, or the ones who have some corner on the experience of God. As tough as it is sometimes for me to deal with the Bible, with all its cultural limitations, its hard-to-understand vocabulary, its male pronouns for God, its images of blood sacrifice, chariots of fire, and wild-haired prophets, the Bible does remind me—in fact, it demands that I notice that I am not alone in my experience of God. The Bible is here because we need a constant reminder that when we speak to our experience of God, this isn't something like the Internet or the iPhone that we can talk about somehow inventing, or controlling or saying “oh yes, I remember the time before I could text message my friends or look up information about almost anything I can imagine with just a few key strokes on the computer.”

No, the Bible, like all the great sacred texts, prompts us to remember that we stand inside a broad, deep river of human experience that reminds us that we are not alone in seeking to know, experience, describe, understand God—and figure out what that experience of God means for how we live our lives.

Listen again to the texts Izzi read earlier—hear in them the voices of our tradition, of this great wide river of human history in which we stand. Hear how their yearnings, their experience, their hopes and their remembering are like ours. First from Psalms, a song of King David:

Bless the LORD, my soul; all my being, bless his holy name!
Bless the LORD, my soul; do not forget all the gifts of God,
Who pardons all your sins, heals all your ills,
Delivers your life from the pit, surrounds you with love and compassion,

Or now from the Gospel of Luke, a glimpse of the impact Jesus had on those he encountered:

And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are free from your ailment.” When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

Or from the book of Hebrews, a reminder to the Christians in Rome and beyond, struggling under the burden of persecution, that they are not alone—neither in history nor in their current situation—and that God is not some tame also-ran, but that God is the powerful, awesome, and transforming source of life that goes beyond this life...listen:

Remember: (Unlike Moses,) you have not come to a mountain that can be touched, nor to a blazing fire, or to darkness and gloom and whirlwind...You have come to the city of the living God, with angels, the heavenly Jerusalem, and with all those in heaven...and to Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant...Therefore, since we are receiving this kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks...and offer God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe. For our God is a consuming, transforming fire.

I mentioned briefly earlier that our family just got back from vacation and that we spent our vacation in Oregon and Northern California. You can't visit this part of the country with your eyes open and some basic understanding of earth science and not notice you are in the midst of volcanoes. The hulking, dormant-but-still-active Mt. Shasta looms over I-5. You can wander through the throat of the volcano at Lassen National Park, where you can see the best examples of bubbling mud pots and fumaroles this side of Yellowstone. You can climb 1500 foot cinder cones that, 1000 years or more after their formation, are still black and foreboding with loose cinders that in the mid-day sun feel almost as hot as the day the cinders spewed forth from the earth. You can hike on huge obsidian and basalt and pumice flows where you can see exactly how this lava oozed from the earth, welling up and folding back on itself, some hitting water or snow, steaming while it cools into smooth black glass. And you can stand on the edge of Crater Lake and peer into the caldera below amazed at the crystalline, bluer than blue water that goes nearly 2000 feet deep—and still there are active vents under all that cold, clear water.

If you see these things, if you stop even for a moment to reflect on what you're seeing, there is absolutely no doubt that our planet is a living system. Oregon's not like Hawaii or Iceland where you literally see molten rock emerging from the ground behind your house, but in geologic terms it might as well be. Crater Lake was formed by an eruption of Mt. Mazama that was only 7000 years ago. That's like 30 seconds in geologic time. The eruption was so huge that the soil my Dad grew his tomatoes and sweet corn in almost

certainly has ash from that eruption, it so completely covered the globe. The earth is alive, powerful, awesome, amazing. It's like that all the time, not just when I notice it.

And yet, as I sped down the road in our motor home in Oregon, more often than not, I'd see the Starbucks sign before I'd see the cinder cone. I'd be singing with our CDs, and not even notice that lava flow from a short 2000 years ago right up against the highway. Once again, I was reminded on this trip of how thankful I am to be married to an earth scientist. He does see the cinder cone before the Starbucks.

I think my trip to volcano country is a lot like my life. So many of the times, I'm looking for the right exit on the freeway than aware of the breath of divine life that is in me and the guy next to me in the BMW that just cut me off. I'm packing the kids' lunches and checking their backpacks, and forgetting the ways I see God in them—in their curiosity, their love for their friends, their desire to play, their humor and hugs. I'm plotting my next strategic move with my big new project, and I don't see the suffering of the people in front of me and how God bids me to serve them. Indeed, it's the human condition to be wandering through terrain that speaks powerfully, definitively, longingly, lovingly of God's grace, love and power, and we don't see it.

My friends, that's why I'm at church today. I know that about myself. I need to be reminded by you and by the clouds of witnesses that have gone before us that God is with us, in us, in you, in me. I need to struggle to express it, to find words for this experience, even though they feel so inadequate to describe, much less define, the power of divine presence. I need to go through rituals that help me remember. I need to tell the stories that others have told before me that have given them comfort and insight. I need to sing songs that evoke in poetry and images what God has meant to others. And I need to pay attention to the stirrings of my own soul and of yours, for indeed, God is still speaking. I need to hear God's voice in me and in you. God is still speaking. I need to hear it. God is still speaking. Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Amen.