

Why Church Matters

Susan R. Andrews

*A sermon preached at Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church, Bethesda, Maryland
December 28, 2003*

Text: Luke 2:41-52

On Christmas Eve, at the midnight service, I told you how glad I am to be home—to be home with my family and to be home with you, my church family. But then I said I was particularly glad to see those who only worship occasionally, who maybe only worship on Christmas Eve. Why? Because it proves just how essential the Christmas story is.

Well, today is different. Today, I am particularly glad to see all of *you*, for you are the hard core folk, the ones who have integrated the life of worship into the weekly rhythms of your lives. You—we—are members of a small and select club—the habitual Christians who even come to church the Sunday after Christmas, the Sunday after Easter, and sometimes even during the dog days of August. As a result, you are the ones who, over the years, have heard the whole story of Scripture and have allowed it to sink into your bones. Yes, you are the ones who have begun to absorb the gospel—to breathe it and taste it and live it. And so, we weekly worship folk are the continuation of the incarnation—the resurrected body of Christ continuing the process of the Word of God becoming flesh. Thank you, my friends, for being here. Thank you for taking seriously this precious calling that God has given us through our baptism.

Today, our Gospel lesson is the only story we have about Jesus between the ages of six weeks and thirty years. And it takes place in church, or rather, in the Temple. We know from the first two chapters of Luke that tradition and worship are important to the writer of the third Gospel. Elizabeth, Zechariah, Anna, Simeon, Mary, and Joseph—they all faithfully honor the traditions of their ancestors by offering prayer and praise and sacrifice regularly in the sanctuary on all the appropriate holy days and family days. Worship for them is like worship has always been for me—as normal and necessary as brushing my teeth. And when I miss worship, there is something not right with my soul.

This story about Jesus and the elders is important. For it tells us something about how Jesus got to be savior of the world. Yes, God created Jesus to be who Jesus is, but Jesus also had to do his part. In the flow of the whole gospel, this Temple story is pivotal because it shows Jesus beginning to understand, beginning to sense his call, and beginning to know that his world is bigger than Nazareth and that his loyalties are larger than Mary and Joseph. The text tells us that Jesus sat, that Jesus listened, that Jesus asked questions—kind of like worship, Sunday School, and confirmation class all rolled into one. And it doesn't take much imagination to see Jesus doing this all the time, not only on his annual treks to Jerusalem, but also week in and week out in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. Though Jesus' ministry took place out there in the streets and cities, the slums and households of Galilee, his own spiritual nurture took place in here—in the weekly habits and rituals of worship and community.

At some level, it seems to be a no-brainer. All the studies show that those of us who are regularly involved in a spiritual community live longer, are healthier, and have happier marriages and less stress in our lives. Churchgoers give away more money, volunteer more hours, and vote more frequently. I bet if church could be sold in a bottle, it would race off the shelves. But, somehow, all this good news does not translate into statistics. Only about twenty percent of Americans worship weekly, and our children, some of whom spend over twenty-five hours a week watching television, are attending one hour of church school less and less frequently. Unlike Jesus, who sat and listened and asked questions in order to figure out who God was and who God wanted him to be, our children increasingly don't have a clue. On this Sunday just before the beginning of a new year, I hope that we can resolve to change this, not only for ourselves, but for all the children and adults we hold dear. Though I sense that you don't need to hear this, I'm going to remind you why church matters and why church is good for you and for those you love.

Church is a place where everyone belongs. Yes, indeed, church is the most egalitarian community on the face of the earth because it begins with the most common denominator of the human condition. We are all created in the image of God—and we have all miserably fallen short of the glory of God. In other words, the church is a halfway house for sinners. What a relief it is to know that we can come here week after week, year after year, and God will love us and welcome us, sin and all. We don't have to be perfect, sweet, nice, successful, well dressed, or socially sophisticated. All we have to do is show up and breathe in the forgiveness and the grace and the new beginning that God always offers us. Hopefully, the people we see and meet when we come here will be just as accepting as God is. But if not, remember, they are sinners, too. And we're all in this mess together.

When I think back over the parishioners I have known and loved over the years, I have to smile at their quirks and their character flaws. Bob was hopelessly prejudiced against anyone who wasn't a WASP, and his mouth resembled a gutter. But he was the most generous man I have ever known with his time—fixing the boiler, painting the choir room, cleaning the bathrooms, and decorating the church for Christmas Eve. Jean was Mrs. Presbyterian—running the women's association with firm and faithful vision, but her gossiping was enough to send me over the edge. Walter was the best consensus builder on session and always came up with brilliant compromises. But I knew I could never count on him to get his committee report in on time. All of which has made me gentler with myself, particularly on those days when I preach a stirring gospel of love from this pulpit and then promptly go home and yell at my family! Thank God that church is where sinners gather and always find the welcoming, warming, and forgiving presence of God.

The church is a laboratory for living—an alternative community offering an alternative vision of an alternative way of life. We come to church just the way we are. But God loves us too much to leave us that way. And so together we hear and explore and act out the story of the Bible—a story that shows us the way the world is meant to be, the way *we* are meant to be.

In what is absolutely essential reading for any parent, the author Ann Lamott has written an essay entitled, "Why I Make Sam Go To Church" (found in *Traveling Mercies*). She starts by saying that her seven-year-old son is the only kid she knows who goes to church—sort of like it

was for my kids when they were growing up. But, Lamott writes:

I make him go because I can...I outweigh him by nearly 75 pounds. But that is only part of it. The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want—which is say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy—are people with a deep sense of spirituality. They are people in community, who pray, or practice their faith—people banding together to work on themselves and for human rights. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful. (p. 100)

Our Presbyterian *Book of Order* says it a bit more theologically: “The church is the provisional demonstration of what God intends for all humanity” (G-3.0200). Now that may not always be true in what we do and say around here, but it’s a pretty good goal—and an excellent reason for all of us to spend as much time in church as possible. This is where, by hearing and living the scriptures, we learn how to be fully human.

Church is—sometimes—where God lives. In other words, it is in a worshiping, loving, learning Christian community that we can most regularly experience the presence of God. Because we can meet God together more easily than we can ever meet God alone. For me, the moments are too numerous to mention. Memorial services where tears are absorbed and broken lives are healed. Anthems where God breaks through the thin places of our hearts and speaks a word of life. Prayer times around this communion table when children connect us to God and to one another. Hushed moments of quiet promising as brides and grooms sink into each other and into the God who holds them together. Dark nights when small flames dance across this sanctuary, and the light, which no darkness can overcome, leads us into the joys and the sorrows of the days that are ahead.

On All Saints Day, I preached and worshiped at the Seventh Presbyterian Church in San Francisco. It is a small, intimate congregation with liturgies custom designed for each week. Prior to sharing the Eucharist, the pastor invited each one of us to come forward and place a lit candle in a large, sand-filled bowl—each candle representing a saint who has graced our lives and who has gone on before us. The choir started singing quiet chants and the procession began. It was a holy moment as, slowly, a river of love moved down the aisle, candle after candle watered by quiet tears, filling the table. Yes, we were enveloped by the communion of the saints, and in that moment God was with us, living in each tear and each heart.

My friends, today, at the age of twelve, Jesus goes to the Temple where he discovers the rituals, the rhythms, and the writings of his faith. He goes to the Temple to experience community and to find out who he is called to be. He goes to the Temple to meet God and to discover the world as God has created it to be. What better way to start our new year than to imitate Jesus, to decide that church matters, and to continue the incarnation through the regular practicing of our own faith? Yes, indeed, coming to church is, according to Scripture, the way we grow “...in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and with God’s people” (Luke 2:52).

May it be so—for you and for me.