

St. Christopher's Episcopal Church  
The Rev. Cara Spaccarelli  
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Luke 4:14-21

“Did Jesus have to go to church?” my children used to ask.

“No . . . Jesus got to go to church.”

Which of course isn't exactly true. There were no churches in Jesus' day. He grew up going to synagogue, which were more religious meeting places, than the kind of worship buildings and program centers we have today. There was the Temple in Jerusalem, and that's where people would travel once a year to make sacrifices, that's where the priests hung out, the more elaborate rituals of worship took place. But outside Jerusalem, out in Nazareth where Jesus grew up, there were synagogues. Not ornate buildings, no priests, but places you gathered with others and studied Scripture and prayed.

A visit to the synagogue went something like it appears in the gospel story today. People show up, someone, anyone, on this day, Jesus, picks up the biblical scrolls and chooses a passage to read. No set lectionary, No page numbers. No bulletins. It's reader's choice. And then they would teach – particularly popular teachers may become rabbis and attract a following.

Jesus must have known what he was looking for when he unrolled that scroll, headed to the prophet Isaiah and his words. A mission statement that he plucks from the revered prophet who lived seven hundred years earlier. He reads them, rolls the scroll up, and sits down, for teachers at the time would sit down to teach, and delivers his first sermon.

Did Jesus have to go to church?

No, Jesus got to go to church, and on that day, he got an audience.

I'm more interested though in all the other times he went to synagogue. The times he didn't pick up the scroll. The times he wasn't the center of attention. Those ordinary Saturdays. Verse 16.

"He went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom." Saturday was the sabbath day for Jews, and I take this verse to mean that most Saturdays he went to synagogue.

What's the son of God, a person who is so intimate with God that the skies open and he hears the voice of God say, "This is my beloved son with whom I am well-pleased" need to stop by the synagogue for. He doesn't need the synagogue to feel close to God, learn about God, etc. He's got God inside him. Like literally.

Now there are probably countless differences between a modern-day church and the first century synagogue, but I'm going to hazard a guess that there are a few similarities and one of them is that some people found it boring. Someone reads from the Bible and then goes on and on about it. A bunch of prayers are said, and then you leave. Not particularly life-changing or moving or meaningful – certainly not for everyone in the room.

Why did Jesus spend time in the synagogue when God was with him in such an intimate way wherever he went? He could bring God to the people in the street. And he did. He spent a lot of time ministering outside the synagogue. But every Sabbath he was there. It was such an ordinary part of his life that it's not a "thing" that he goes to synagogue; it's part of his custom, a normal backdrop for various stories in the gospels – teachings, healings, debates. He found something there in that gathering of people that he didn't find elsewhere.

Less people are finding that something today. The stats of decline in churchgoing in the US have been well-documented, though I'll be honest – we don't have great stats on church attendance a hundred years ago, so sometimes church decline is measured against a very brief golden age of churchgoing that occurred in the 1950s. There is no doubt that there is a trend downward. Far less people attend church today than did ten years ago, twenty years ago, thirty years ago, and so on, all the way back to that golden age of the 1950s and 60s.

Twenty years ago my take on that was "oh well". People are finding community elsewhere. They find spiritual meaning outside organized religion. I'll pay attention to those who finding community and spiritual meaning in my sphere of influence. Then, we started seeing the rates of loneliness, of anxiety and depression, of so many negative health and relational indicators climb and climb – and part of it is that people are comfortable naming it now when maybe they weren't before, but it made me think differently about the decline in church attendance. That maybe people weren't finding community and spiritual meaning elsewhere either.

Two weeks ago the outgoing Surgeon General issued his “Parting Prescription for America.”<sup>1</sup> A 32 page document about the importance of community. His diagnosis that what truly ails the American people, what is leading to our poor health outcomes – physically and emotionally - is a lack of community and a lack of meaning that comes from being engaged in community.

I think community is what Jesus found in the synagogue. He knew God intimately; his ministry was clear to him, but it was the community of faithful that anchored him, it was the rhythm of regular gathering. It was the slow work of relationship-building that happens amidst the mundane. It was praying alongside people one didn’t agree with. See there are aspects of God that can only be known in relationship with the diversity and complexity of God’s creation. You can’t know it on your own, even if you are the son of God.

I don’t know why fewer and fewer people find community and meaning in church - find community and meaning in anything. I think they are worthy questions to ponder, because if we want more people to experience God and God is experienced in community - than we have to understand the barriers to experiencing it. Today though I want to celebrate you who are here, you who are finding or looking for a community anchored in God here. On this day that we remember Jesus’ custom of synagogue participation, on this day when we bless the beginning of the confirmation journey of a dozen of our high schoolers as they explore what it means to

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/my-parting-prescription-for-america.pdf>

commit to their faith as part of a community of faith, I invite you to ponder one person's answer to the question – why church?

After growing up in the church, Trudy Smith found herself in young adulthood finding service opportunities and connection outside the church and finding Sunday worship bland and passive. Then she found herself back in church occasionally at first, the more and more, discovering that: “[Church] was more like a refuge where all sorts of people could gather to remind each other of the story we were all in—the one about how God loves us, and is renewing our world and our souls in spite of all the damage that’s been done. It was more like a school for conversion where we were all stumbling through basic lessons on how to love. We sang about this love and this mission to be part of it; we sang about our brokenness and our hope. We looked each other in the eye. We confessed our sins. We shared bread . . . It wasn’t perfect—sometimes I felt frustrated, bored or hurt—but it was good, and God was in it.”<sup>2</sup>

Every Sunday I don’t feel like “I get to go to church.” Sometimes even I feel frustrated, bored, or hurt, and I have to remind myself that even Jesus went to church. Even Jesus found being grounded in a weekly rhythm of community important to being connected to God, so maybe it has something for me that I can’t find anywhere else too. I hope the same for you.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://relevantmagazine.com/faith/why-i-go-church-even-when-i-dont-feel-it/>