

Many of us ask, Why do I go to church? Many of us were sort of “forced” to go as children; we went simply due to the expectation of our parents (and my brother and I were expected to wear a jacket and tie!). Many of us continued going to church through confirmation classes in our early teens, and even went in high school due to parental expectation or perhaps even a guilt trip from someone. Some of us started attending later in life, and that begs the question why did we start going, and then a follow-up question, “Why do we stay?”

In rather simple terms, I think the answer is two-fold... First, to find meaning and purpose to life ... our connection with God, our connection with inner spirit. AND second, to find support along life’s journey, to find friends, and to practice loving neighbors as best we can. Most of you received an email with the article I wrote to the local paper for this past Friday, Sept 5, but let me quote the opening now:

BACK TO SCHOOL, BACK TO...?

Regular gym workouts? Church? Spiritual practices? I know we are still in summer, but now is the time to start thinking about committing some time this fall to groups that add meaning and support to our lives! YOU ARE INVITED ... to all our communities of worship and spiritual practice! Our divisive world needs people that believe in things like respect, kindness, and “loving one’s neighbor!”

We spiritual leaders speak of connection with Divine Spirit, “God. Some may refer to Divine connection as connection with one’s deepest Self. In a simple analogy, some people call it a vertical connection. It follows, that relationships with neighbors could be called our “horizontal” connections. Spiritual leaders show plenty of diversity in what it means to connect with God, so people naturally find kinds of worship where we feel most comfortable.

These two movements, connection with “God,” and connection with neighbors, are indeed summed up in our gospel lesson, when Jesus is asked about the greatest of the commandments. (Love God

with all your heart, soul, mind, strength... and secondly, “Love your neighbor as you love yourself”). This morning I’ll focus more on the first part, loving God, and next week more on the second part, loving others.

So **Praise** to God (Giving Thanks) is a fundamental starting point of most all religious worship. In our hymnal, we have so many great songs of praise to open worship, that it can be hard to choose! The lyrics of hymns are not only poetic, with nice images and rhymes, but they usually teach us some good theology, some ways to think about God, ways to connect with God. I chose the first hymn, “Immortal Invisible, God Only Wise” because I think the theology is very important... that *God is **Mystery***. The second phrase of the song rings in my ears: “Light Inaccessible, Hid from our Eyes.” These words speak volumes: Yes, “God” can be named metaphorically as LIGHT, yet that Light is ultimately “inaccessible,” ultimately beyond our seeing, hid from our eyes.

We often say that God, Divine Spirit, can only be defined using metaphors. “*All* language about God is metaphorical,” one of my seminary teachers once stated. So trying to connect with this God (the “vertical” or inner move of our spirit) is quite a mystery, and spiritual practices *must* vary from religion to religion and person to person. But I’ll mention a few: (Praise and Thanksgiving!)

Perhaps the most obvious way to connect with God is through **Nature**. Psalm 121: “I lift my eyes to the hills!” Psalm 23: “the Lord leads me beside still waters and green pastures!” Jesus taught with many lessons from nature. The sower of seeds... If we want more happiness and love in our lives, we need to be good soil, good receptive soil, allow the spirit of God to plant seeds of happiness and love in us, then we have to nurture or water these seeds, and plant a few seeds ourselves! So many things in nature can connect us with God, the great and mysterious creator...

Light, as we mentioned: Sunlight! ... How we love sunny days, how we love the beautiful colors of sunrise or sunset. We can delight in sunlight and praise the Creator for the warmth and energy of the sun! The sun, like God, can be too intense to see face to face. And like God, when we cannot see the sun, we know it still exists, due to effects like daylight and warmth.

Water! How we love a cool drink, a cool swim on a hot day... a refreshing and cleansing shower (so easy to take some of these things for granted. All we need to do to increase our gratitude is look at the sad videos of war-torn places... little water to drink, no water to bathe, no dipping into a pool or lake on blistering hot days! We can delight in water and praise God for the amazing gift of water!

The diversity of creatures! (That's another great opening hymn: "All Creatures of our God and King") I know that I love TV shows on Nature, as creatures small and large are so amazing, not to mention our own human body... amazing! That is usually one "reason" that we say: There Must Be a God, a Creator!" With all due respect to Darwinian Scientists and "survival of the fittest" that must have taken place, there must also be an organizing principle, a creative energy that brings some order, some intricate beauty, note the incredible beauty of flowers and birds! I think we can have both Darwinian truths and "creative leaps" in the evolution living beings.

Music is another key way to connect with God... Singing, and tapping feet, Most psalms were written by king David who was a musician before he became also a warrior. His last few psalms speak about praising God with harps and drums and trumpets and all kinds of instruments. We love symphony music, or modern bands that utilize many instruments (Even though I play sax, I love brilliant trumpets in the big band sound!) We know organs are like mini-orchestras; Even this little one, under a skilled player, has so many different sounds and volumes (That's a great reason to come to

church: the music can lead us and inspire, and even ring in our ears for hours or days later).

We come to church, to worship God, first and foremost, to love God with all our heart, movements of praise and gratitude. It could be called a “vertical” move, or perhaps an “inner” journey. That being said, I’d be remiss if I did not mention **Silence: prayer and meditation**. I was listening to a radio show with Dr. Sanjay Gupta, a well known neurosurgeon. He talk of meditating once with the Dali Lama; so Dr. Gupta has experimented and experienced a “Letting Go,” a reaching beyond ourselves to the Great Beyond! We could call this an “experience” of God. The peace, the insights, the intuitions, the wisdom that can come from quiet moments (Think of Quaker worship, or think of the Eastern practice of simply being “In the present moment,” quiet meditation, not as verbal and heady as many of our church prayers). Interestingly enough, Dr. Gupta was speaking about pain relief, and said we have an *“endogenous opioid system”... that activates pain reducing endorphins when we meditate upon or “savor” good and pleasant things*. Religious folks have always called this the power of prayer.. that “inner” connection with a God of Peace and Love, that helps us with our other relationships in life.

Quoting Jewish and Christian scriptures again, “Love your Neighbor as you love yourself.” Yet the saying holds true that you cannot love others if you don’t love yourself. One way to love ourselves is to connect with the God of love, the Source of Love. This then leads to ability to love others. So we come, and keep coming to church ... as *one* way to strengthen our Love for God, our connection with God, which of course helps us to love our neighbors. More on that next week. Amen.