

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
October 17 & 18, 2015
John Crosby
We Gather
Acts 2:42-47**

It's either the worst day or the best day to be here because today we get a chance to ask, what is it we believe God wants us to do in this building at 70th Street and Highway 100? The idea we want to talk about is, what kind of church are *we the church* becoming? I want to connect us to that first church back in Acts. I want to connect you in your everyday life to what happens here and it all begins when you come here. Church begins when you gather the community together. It says in the book,

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, [Acts 2:42, 46].

We call that worship. Probably that's the wrong word. We should worship all the time, but when we gather the community together, we call it worship and hope that special things will happen, things like Baptism. Last night we baptized a little one and there was a friend of mine sitting right over there. He's not here now so I won't be embarrassing him by using his name. His name is Matt. Matt and I didn't meet at church. We met playing basketball. He was so excited when he had a new little baby. He showed me her picture, but I could tell what was going to come next so I cut him off. I said, "Matt, I love this baby, but you're not going to ask me to baptize her, are you? You don't want me to baptize her when you're not coming to church, do you?" And he was like, "Well, no, of course not. What gave you that idea?"

What made her baptism so special was that she was baptized and her little sister was baptized and her dad Matt was baptized, all at the same time. It was a special day. And ever since then, most weeks that he's in town, not every week, but for the last 12 years or so, Matt has come here to gather for worship. I wonder if it's done any good. I wonder if he would say that coming to worship has changed his life.

One of the goals of gathering together like this is that a skeptical world would get to come in the door and see what happens here. It's the most common first step that people take. They come to church once, but they will only come back or it will only matter if something extraordinary is happening. So what I'd like to do this morning is to change your view, whether you are ten or 90, of why you should come to the gathering, how it could change your life. Take out those little cards, will you? Write on the top, just across the top this little phrase, *worship portal world*. Just write those three words. What that will remind you is that I told you that worship is meant to be a portal, an open door, an open window, to another world. You come here to get a picture or to

walk through a door into another world. Write those three words *worship portal world* at the top of the card on the long way across.

Anybody remember that old movie *The Matrix*? There's another world happening at the same time and all of a sudden, Neo can see that world. I think that's what worship is supposed to be. You're supposed to see that there is another world going on that you are oblivious to most of the time. A lot of people come right to the edge of the portal and say, "No, I think I'd rather just go to worship. I think I'd rather just go to church." So I want to ask you, are you ever going through the portal? Are you changing because you come to the gathering? I want you to write ten words on the card. You'll be writing on the long way, right? I'll tell you what the words are. In politics they talk about the ten-word answer. Everybody knows that the ten-word answer in politics is the one zinger that changes everything. "Young man, I knew Jack Kennedy and I like Jack Kennedy but, trust me, you're no Jack Kennedy." People remember that. People remember a president at the Berlin Wall saying, "*Ich bin ein Berliner*." All free men are citizens of Berlin. A ten-word answer changes things. Sometimes it changes things in a bad way. "Read my lips. No new taxes." And when you have to go back on that, it changes everything. But usually, the ten-word answer lets you see things differently. Another president stands at the Berlin Wall and says, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall" and the wall comes down.

I want to give you ten words that can change you. They're not sexy or flashy, but I think they can change you. What happens as we gather here together? We have a chance to be changed. What does it feel like to come to worship? Let me give you a picture of what I think most of you feel like most of the time when you come to worship. You look a lot like this. [Slide shown.] The great theologian of the twentieth century, Homer Simpson, struggling to find the right answer to pass the test, but it ties to the first word about worship. Homer is saying, "Really? Should I come again? I'm not a bad guy. I work hard. I love my kids. Why should I spend half of my Sunday hearing about how I'm going to hell?" That's the first way that coming to worship changes your life? It is *inconvenient*. Worship will change your life because it's inconvenient. It is the discipline of inconvenience, going to a place that we don't choose at a time that we don't choose for a purpose that we *do* choose. Are you letting yourself be inconvenienced by coming to God's gathering, or is the gathering the first thing in your life that gets dropped? I'm not trying to make anybody feel guilty about anything. We're busy people, but I know that we make time for the most important things. I need to ask you, are you regularly being inconvenienced?

The second word is *association*. Association means that you gather in a church differently than you do the rest of your week. Association means I meet with some people that I like; I meet with other people I don't like; I meet with a lot of people I don't know for a purpose that I believe in. I believe that God wants to change your life by bringing you into the gathering and changing your associations. Some of you have just come to the edge of the portal and said, "No, I think I'm just going to sit in the back pew for the next six years and take notes." When is the last time that you developed a new relationship in the gathering or are you just sitting in the pews?

Now I've got to tell you, here's part of the problem for the church. When we ask people to come to Christ, they come. When we ask people to come to church, they come, but then what are we going to do with them? C. S. Lewis talks about this. He became a convert to Christianity and his book *The Screwtape Letters* talks about what it was like to come, not to Christianity, but to come to church. The senior devil reassures the junior devil that all is not lost because somebody has become a Christian and says this:

One of our great allies at present is the Church itself. Do not misunderstand me. I do not mean the Church as we see her spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners. That, I confess, is a spectacle which makes our boldest tempters uneasy. But fortunately it is quite invisible to these humans.

He says that all they see is that building on the corner.

When he goes inside, he sees the local grocer with rather an oily expression on his face bustling up to offer him one shiny little book containing a liturgy which neither of them understands When he gets to his pew and looks round him he sees just that selection of his neighbors whom he has hitherto avoided.

The devil says,

You want to lean pretty heavily on those neighbors.

Will you associate with people you like and people you don't like and people you don't know so that God can change your life? The third word, the third way that I believe that gathering changes us, is the word *ritual*. Ritual means gathering when we feel like it, gathering when we don't feel like it, and finding meaning in doing the same things over and over. Are you finding meaning in ritual or are you just doing the same things over and over? It's like somebody who has been teaching first grade for 20 years and another person has been teaching the same class again and again and they haven't learned anything. I think ritual is about remembering things you've forgotten. Ritual is about learning and I think coming into the community means we do the same thing again and again so sometimes you remember, "Oh, I forgot that," and sometimes you learn.

I grew up a very faithful church goer. I went to church every Christmas and almost every Easter so I knew what happened. In my church, the ritual was you come up for Communion and you just go right out the back door. You don't wait for the end of the service. You just go right out for the doughnuts. But when I started coming to church for real to see if God was in the house, I began to learn new songs. One of the songs that I learned was *Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing*. It's a great old hymn. The start of the second verse says, "Here I raise mine Ebenezer; hither by thy help I'm come."

I sang that with gusto for years and finally I turned to the person next to me and went, what does that mean and they didn't know either. We were just singing the words. It was a ritual, a rut. Do you know what an Ebenezer is? An Ebenezer is a pile of rocks that the Israelites would pull together to mark a place where God did something unusual. They called a stone an Ebenezer stone so when they walked by and their grandson would say, "Grandpa, what's that?" Grandpa would say, "Oh, that's where God parted the Red Sea." "What's that pile of rocks?" "Oh, that's where God made the walls fall down." "Here I raise my Ebenezer." It's a reminder to look for the places where God was faithful and to remember. "Oh, I get it." Sometimes you remember and sometimes you learn. The power of ritual.

When Brian McLaren gave this lecture, he said that what happens as you gather sets the tone for everything that will happen next. Are you coming here to be inconvenienced? Will you associate with the people you meet here and will you make the ritual matter? But what happens while we are in the room, while the service is going on, can change your life too. And the first

thing that happens, write down the word *speed*, is that when we come to the gathering, God wants to change our speed. Sometimes slowing down, altering our pace, is the only way to see what we have been missing and to feel a different rhythm in our week.

Someone has written that hurry is the curse of the modern age. If you don't know why you're not hearing God, it's because you're going too fast, so when we come here, we have to slow down. Hurry is the worst thing for your soul. It's always a little fun to me when I see people fidget. The young ones can't help it. After 15 or 20 minutes, they're fidgeting. They've written on every part of the Bible they can get their hands on. They've written on your arms. They're doing everything. You see that they haven't learned to live at this speed yet. I love it when I see one of you fall asleep. Really! I used to take it personally. I do take it personally still. Don't fall asleep! But sometimes the most spiritual thing you can do is rest. I believe you need to change your speed. You can only hear things when you slow down.

What happens while we gather here is we change our speed and now we learn another word. Write down the word *attentiveness*. Your body can be here and your mind somewhere else. Coming into the gathering means that my mind is here and my body is here and I am waiting for God to say something. It is the spiritual discipline of waiting, for I may receive only by waiting. We are so used to the drive-through. We're so used to the microwave. We're so used to the Google that we don't see that much of the time in our lives. The most important thing comes only as we wait, waiting for the thing I can receive only by waiting. The other part of that, by the way, is, do you expect to come here to hear something that will change your life or are you just coming to check off the box? If you don't come expecting to hear something that will change your life, trust me, you won't hear anything that will change your life. But if you come attentively, God can surprise you.

Here is another way that I think gathering here can change you as an individual and can change us as a community. After you become attentive, the next thing that I believe happens is that you see *models*. One of the things that happen as we gather together is that we see people doing the life of faith in ways that are different from us, ways that we can learn from. We expose people who are apprentices in faith to people who are masters in the faith. One of the reasons we asked Debbie Manning to pray here is because when Debbie prays for people, half the time I want to be going, oh, yes, Lord, You know what she said. Yeah, yeah. That, too. That's what I was going to say, only not as well. Debbie prays and I feel like God listens. I want to learn to pray like that.

Sometimes the pastor opens the Bible and preaches and you look at the verse in the book and go, "I've been here for 40 years and I've never seen that verse in my whole life." But you will learn how to read it because somebody models it for you. One of the most important things that happens when we gather the community together in this idea of modeling is that you see *you*. You see a retired person come up here or come up on the video and say, "You know, I just thought it was all over when I lost my job the last time, but this is the best season of my life in my faith." You have somebody who shares with you how they struggle with the same things you struggle with. They model what it's like. So the question in modeling is, what's the last thing you learned from prayer or singing or a sermon or a testimony that has made you more forgiving, more generous, more risk taking, more content?

Another thing I'd point to that happens while we are gathered together is a word that I made up, *catholicity*. When we did the Apostles' Creed, remember, *I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy*

catholic church. Catholicity means that when I come to the gathering, I grow my world. I hear quotes. I hear us praying for other churches. I hear the affirmation of people on the path of faith and I am brought together with people who are very different from me. My heart and my mind get bigger. It's uncomfortable so I guess the test there is, is your faith more catholic than it used be, catholic with a small "c"? Do you see more of what God is doing in the world or is your world shrinking, "I know what I know so don't bother me"?

What happens as we gather is that we come to believe that there is a ritual that changes us. There is an association with others that can change us. There is inconvenience that shapes us. What happens while we are here is that our speed changes and we pay attention to new things. We see people model life of faith and our world gets bigger because it becomes more catholic. May I just tell you that I think the church only matters at 70th and 100 when you come here, when you gather here, if what happens here changes what happens out there. I believe that's what God wants to happen.

I believe that's what happened in the first church. I believe that when people came into those gatherings, they learned the power of *hospitality*. How hospitable are you? Hospitality means using my presence in our space. In other words, if you've been here four or five times, this feels like your space. Using my presence in our space to help *the other* feel welcomed, feel invited, feel valued. It doesn't just mean inviting someone to church. It means being hospitable to the other, whether that is my cubemates or my neighbor or the person in front of me in line. Hospitality means using my presence in this space to help the other feel welcomed.

So let me just ask you this. Are you just coming to church or is this a place where you learn hospitality? Who have you invited in the last year or so? More than that, I don't want to make you feel guilty, but if you are learning about hospitality, who have you greeted here that you don't already know? I had one of those terrible moments recently that a pastor has when a woman came up and said, "I'm going to join your church anyway." I say, "What do you mean?" She goes, "I'm going to join your church anyway, but you keep talking about being friendly and I've been here 10 weeks and nobody has said boo to me." What she meant was that she felt invisible. Are we practicing the presence of God in hospitality?

I believe when God's people are brought together, *generosity* is a mark. People who come to the gathering over and over and go through the portal, remember it's not just coming into the building, it's going through the portal to see that other world, they become generous people. They become people who have greater pleasure in being generative, that is, fruitful, than they do in being consumptive. They are people who become more generous and productive instead of just taking. Some of them have actually learned that it might be true when Jesus said that it is more blessed to give than to receive and they've tried it. It's not always about money. It could be about serving in the second grade choir or saying yes to that meeting on the other side of town, but we are becoming more generous people because we are brought together. I love this line: people who learn the spiritual discipline of generosity have realized that giving is an insult to American greed. So I guess I would ask you, are you becoming a more generous person by coming to this place? Are you gaining enough control over your wallet and your Day-Timer or is the Evil One tricking you? Are you moving toward the tithe or are you still tipping? Are you becoming an open heart? I think that what happens because we gather here changes us only if it changes the community we live in.

The next word is the word *shalom*. Can you write down *shalom*? On the screen I think the last word is going to be *justice and mercy*, but the word in the Bible for justice and mercy is *shalom*. If you come here over and over, I believe God wants to form in you a hunger for justice and mercy out there. The Upper Room, our 20-something service, used to say, *let what we do in here fill the streets out there*. If you come here, do you get indignant about injustice, small or big, and does it ever lead to action? Who cares if you feel bad? Do you ever do anything about it? It could be something tiny. It could be a postcard to your congressperson. It could be walking the streets at night to see whose lights are out. Do you feel through the preaching and the singing and the praying that what we do in here might fill the streets out there?

May I tell you, I think this last word, this justice and mercy, is the only way the American church will thrive in the next thirty years? Right now, people look at the American church and say, "That's a bunch of people who are against a lot of stuff. They are angry about a lot of stuff." Wouldn't you like to change the dial so that when people look at what happens at 70th and 100, they would say, "Oh, those are the guys who gave a million dollars to the poor in the inner city. They are part of that against-the-slave trade movement. They have been reaching out to kids with disabilities. Let's go to a church like that because justice and mercy are important there."

Here's what I'd like you to do. If you have written down any of these words, I'd like you to take just a second to look at them and be reminded of this. The church has always been ugly. Archbishop Carey said, "The church is always only one generation away from extinction." A lot of people just come to church; they don't go through the portal, but when they do, not only do their lives change but the church itself changes. Laura and I went to Israel several years ago and when we were in Bethlehem, a Jew from an illegal Jewish settlement came up and gave us a lecture about why it was okay to take the Arab's land. "Tough luck." At the end, I was trying to make conversation with him and he goes, "You're a Christian, right?" I said, "Yes, I am." And he said, "This is terrible." I didn't know what he meant and I said, "What do you mean?" And he goes, "The Christians are leaving the Holy Land right and left. We need you in the Holy Land because neither we Jews nor those Arabs know how to forgive anybody and the flight of the church means the walls will stay up." Oh, that it were true! What would happen if the people gathering in this place saw God change the world again?

Look at those words. Take just a minute. What I'd like you do is, look at the word that you feel the best about as you are engaged in gathering. Put a big star next to that one. Then, if you're honest with yourself, maybe there are one or two of those words that you should circle and think about so that the next time you come to church, you're not just coming to church. The Spirit will do the rest. Take just a minute.

Lord Jesus, You said that Your church would prevail against the gates of hell. We can't even prevail against NFL football, but I believe that a God who would come for us in the flesh and show us how to love, and die for us, is worth coming to hear about. I ask You for all these folks, the one who came for the Baptism and the one who came for a change of pace and the one who never misses, I ask You to gather us again in ways that You will speak to our hearts and change our eternities so that we'll be a blessing to all around us. In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.