

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
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John Crosby
REGENERATE: Living Stories
Hebrews 10:19-25**

Let us join together with sincere hearts and draw near to God in the full assurance that faith waits. It's the power of stories like that that give meaning to the offering. They show us why we are supposed to gather. Right from the very beginning of Jesus' resurrection, His followers had gathered together in small groups and in houses and in auditoriums. It says in the Book of Acts, they met daily in the temple to listen to the apostle teaching.

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 2:46]

When we gather together, what could possibly go wrong? The Bible has two parts to it, the part before Jesus, the Old Testament, and the New Testament, which is the story of God's people since Jesus. Much of the New Testament is what is called responsive theology; that is, one of the authors of one of the Letters in the Bible sees something happening in the early community of Jesus followers and writes a Letter to address it. Our Call to Worship came out of the Book of Hebrews, "Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart." But the responsive part of it came out a little later in that same letter. It says,

25 Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching [Hebrews 10:25].

In the life of the followers of Jesus by the end of that very first generation, there were all these people who said, "Yeah, I like coming to church but not every week. I like coming together but I find other ways to be fed." It was the expression of Christmas-people and Easter-people, those who would come on occasion but not regularly. Today throughout much of the Western World, people worry that the church is in decline because people don't come to the worship gatherings as much as they used to. Gatherings are failing to engage all the generations.

It's odd to speak to you about this as a pastor because I really identify with those people who don't show up every week. For many years I was a Christmas and Easter person. First, because as a young Catholic boy growing up, as soon as my parents stopped making me go, I stopped going. And I only went on Christmas and Easter when they made me. Then after college when I came to Christ and started to be a follower of Jesus, I found church pretty boring. I loved Young Life or Campus Life, those places that were filled with people my age and energy and great songs and neat stories, but I found church, frankly, confusing. They sang songs I didn't know and they always seemed to talk too long. I didn't connect with the people. I got in and I got out. But my friends who were older in the faith kept saying, "You've got to go to worship," and over

time I learned that there was more happening inside the building than I had thought. It was like worship itself was a language, a new language of faith that had to be learned. It was a discipline and none of us like discipline, right? But it was a discipline that started to change me.

I also started to wonder if some of my resistance to going to church was not spiritual in nature. That is, if there is one time during the week when God wants to speak to us and encourage us, and make us more of what He has for us, wouldn't the Evil One want to keep me away? Wouldn't the Evil One want to tell us, "Oh, it's not convenient"? Then, the third reason that I realized people don't come to church is that I think sometimes we just do church poorly, and when we do it poorly, we make the most exciting thing in the world boring. That's why we led with Bev and Byron and Jess and Jessie to show how coming to church faithfully, year after year, decade after decade, and getting involved with sincere hearts, how it changes people's lives.

On this Sunday before Thanksgiving, we want to talk about how sincere worship strengthens our faith. Every single one of you has doubts. If you don't, you're not awake. Every single one of you has times in your faith when, it's not like you don't believe but it goes stale, and worship in different ways at different times can help you. Sometimes it's nothing that's said up front. It's one of the songs. It's one of the great hymns of the faith. You go, "Yeah!" and you find yourself humming it on Thursday. Sometimes the only thing that keeps you coming back to worship is the children's sermon, right? And I'm not talking about the only part of the sermon you can understand. I'm talking about the faces of the children. Sometimes God works in worship for you through the Scripture lesson that makes you realize you are believing the same thing that thousands and thousands of other pilgrims through the years have believed and struggled with. For some of you, it may be that offering thing. Four times out of five, okay, open the wallet. "I really have been blessed to have enough to share." One time out of five maybe, it's boring. For some of you the prayers of the morning can drone on and on and on, but every once in a while, it's like God is saying, "I'm with them. I love them, so I love *you*." Whatever it is, coming here can grow you if you keep coming.

This week we want to change your Thanksgiving so I thought I would just share three things from this passage in the Book of Hebrews that says,

22 let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water [Hebrews 10:22].

Three reasons that this could change your week. I'm going to have a couple of people come and share their stories, but the first reason that you should come here is that it is just for you. How many of you this week have done something wrong? Okay, how many of you are sitting next to somebody who is in denial? I ask you to slip your hand up if this is you. For how many of you was it that you lost your temper or said the wrong words? For how many of you was it that you chickened out from doing something you knew you were supposed to do? How many of you chose to be late for something that was important to somebody else? How many of you did not do your best? How many of you saw somebody coming and you turned away? How many of you are saying, "Well, thank goodness he missed mine"? But you thought of it.

This is the reason that you come into this building. Because you are a beloved child of God and you are a broken child of God, and in the breaks in your life, you hurt yourself. You hurt your

God, you hurt other people, and coming here together is a time that can change that. The writer of the Hebrews says, “having our hearts and bodies cleansed and washed.” The one thing that is unique to Christianity, that sets us apart, is forgiveness. We believe God comes in Jesus Christ, not just to wipe the slate clean, but to wash *us* clean. Not just to give you a second chance but to say, “You are forgiven.” And when we come here, we get reminded that each one of us desperately needs to confess that we are broken people who desperately need to be forgiven or our hearts will harden. You’ll think it’s not your fault. Pride or fear will start to change you. The relationships with God and others and yourself that are broken will get more broken. We come here because I, you, regularly need to hear,

8 If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. **9** If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us [1st john 1:8-9].

It is far more than the reset button though. It is being cleansed and washed. Close your eyes for just a second. How many of you have done something this week or this month or not done something this week or this month for which you would like to be forgiven? Just raise your hand. How many of you would like to be washed clean?

In the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ, I declare that as far as the East is from the West, so far has God taken your sins from you. Be clean. Amen.

That’s the first thing that happens when you come to worship. “Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and in full assurance that faith brings and be cleansed and washed so that we can thank God.” Then it goes on and says,

23 Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess

In our faith, hope is the coin of the realm. If you don’t have hope, it doesn’t matter what else you have. Hope is what God offers us and it is not “things will be better in the morning.” It is not optimism. Christian hope is a view of the world that is different from the way the rest of the world looks at it. Hope is the recognition that God is doing something different in your life than circumstances would seem to indicate. Sometimes the hope of God can best be seen when we listen to another person’s journey so I’ve asked Eli Mansfield if she would be brave and come up here. Eli is the newest member of our staff. She is on our Missions team, helping to get people engaged in Missions activities. She has been coming here for several years, and I asked her if she would just share a little of her story.

[Crosby:] When you started to come here, what are some of the things that people would see in your life?

[Mansfield:] Well, I was invited to come by a friend. I’m a recovering Catholic, like you, and I wasn’t getting what I needed where I was attending. When I started to come here, I became a happier person and feeling like I could start my week. Since then, other people in my family have joined just because of the feeling of community that I have here and that I’ve shared.

[Crosby:] What was your life like outside of the church? You told me you grew up single.

[Mansfield:] Yeah, my mom and I, we were single for the first twelve years of my life, pretty much. I grew up being taught that you can do whatever you set your mind to. She was a strong figure in my life, and so I pretty much for the rest of my life have felt like I have control and can do just that. Then her passing in 2008 was a real life-changer for me because she was everything to me. That's when I really had to do some soul searching. For about two years, I was kind of wallowing in this place of haze, if you will, and I felt pretty alone. I was coming here and I kept coming. One day, it was two years after the month that she passed, you were giving a sermon talking about the central theme in the Bible being God's promise, "I will be with you." I felt like a warm blanket was placed around me and I cried in the pew and when the service ended, coincidentally, all these God things, out in the Great Room the Missions Fair was going on. I just felt like, okay, this is my calling to do something. I kind of got out of my slump and I walked across the Great Room and I signed up to go to Zambia.

[Crosby:] Actually, we were on that trip together. But that trip was not the end of the chapter, it was the start of something new.

[Mansfield:] It really was. Talk about a life-changer. It really made me understand the disparity and the lack of human dignity that exists in developing countries, and I really felt like I needed to do something about it. Because my experience was so personally transformational, I felt like other people needed to see these things. Other people needed to go and do. So I started leading trips with CPC as well as another Christian-based missional organization, and now I've led five different trips. It's been quite a journey.

[Crosby:] So you're doing this. You're a hard-charging, creative, get-it-done career professional, and then this year another big turn, or another big battle. How has that affected you?

[Mansfield:] What John is referring to is, this year on January 2, I was diagnosed with breast cancer, so it was a little bit like *happy, freaking New Year*. But basically, again life changes. I went through five months of chemo and had a double mastectomy on August 1. I'm happy to say that they think they got it all, but through that time, the biggest change was just being at a certain amount of peace that I would never have been prepared to have if I hadn't been sunk in here. Friends, who are now life-long friends, prayed with me and prayed for me. I blogged a lot on CaringBridge, and the comments that would come back would just fill me up...the constant prayers. As I said, I don't think I personally would have dealt with it quite the same way if I hadn't had some of the experiences here that I had.

[Crosby:] So as you look back, life back then, life now, what would you say are some of the biggest changes that you have going forward?

[Mansfield:] Well, certainly being in community here has made a huge difference. I'm a classroom-style learner so I love worship. For me, that really resonates, and being here, being involved, staying engaged allows for those, what I call drip-drip-drips of God's whispers to come. Everything changes when you get those.

[Crosby:] My hope is that the God who has started to develop this deep trust in Eli will show us that we ain't seen nothing yet. God bless you! [Clapping.]

“Let’s draw near to God with sincere hearts and find the assurance of our faith. Let’s be washed clean by forgiveness and then let’s hold up the hope that we unswervingly profess.” The writer of Hebrews says that real worship happens when we spur one another on to love and good deeds, when we encourage one another.

24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.

I think that nobody *drifts* into greatness. Nobody stumbles their way alone into a life of meaning and service. I think sometimes you need to be pulled up on the ledge. Other times you need to be kicked off the ledge. But the only people who will do that for you are people who love you and love God and want to encourage you and spur you on. I saw an example of that some years ago. Billy Arnold, a local comedian, and Jay Carrol had told me about a friend of theirs, Tim Emmer, whose life was in the process of being changed. Tim started to come here and I had the privilege of hearing some of his story. I would love for you to hear it as well. Tim Emmer.

[Emmer:] Thank you very much. I was someone who thought I had it all under control, who could manage my life, but it turned out I couldn’t. I always thought I knew Jesus but it turned out, I only knew an awful lot *about* Jesus. I thought I understood grace, but it turned out, I really didn’t have any idea.

The seeds were planted in me at a very early age to have a heart for Jesus and I took security and a great deal of comfort through His love as expressed through my parents. My role models growing up were primarily Christian and there was a lot of influence in my life that would catapult me into a Christian life. I was always connected with Biblical teaching. My schooling from grade school through college was in Christ-centered schools and colleges. But about ten years ago, I began to fall away from that faith that had been developed in me as a young man. My active spiritual life really kind of started to diminish. Christianity was pretty low on my priority list. I mean, I had a lot to do. I had career to build. I had a life to build for myself. I had always been drawn to understanding the death and resurrection of Jesus. I knew why He had to die for us, why He chose to die for us, but it never dawned on me that there was more to faith than just knowing. Things on the outside were going really well for me. I had great friendships. I have a very tight-knit family. I was finding success.

Somewhere in my story, I’m not sure exactly when, I started to feel great anxiety. I felt unfulfilled and confused. I couldn’t really pinpoint where it was coming from. I just felt lost. My escape from that was alcohol. I started drinking frequently. Drinking for me became much more than enjoying a party or having a nice evening on the town with friends. Then it stopped doing something to me, release and fun, and started doing something *for* me. It was the cure. I didn’t feel anxious. I didn’t feel lonely. I didn’t feel confused when I was drunk. Alcohol was my way out. I’ve come to learn since (I’ve been in recovery for a little over four years, by the grace of God) quite a bit about how progressive chemical addiction can be. It takes far more and more of the same chemical to get the same result, the same escape, the same release. Nearly all effective recovery programs and counselors will tell you that at its root, addiction is a spiritual problem. Dealing with reality, the only way to deal with it, is to escape it. Most addicts like me find themselves just enslaved by it. It’s a spiritual malady that separated me from my family, from my community, from my God.

My friends and family started to take notice. I was delusional about what a sinister influence alcohol was having in my life, justifying my behavior and living in the delusion that it wasn't affecting those I love in the way that it was. Well, the truth is, I was affecting them far greater than I knew. I was becoming unreliable. This wasn't like me. It was painful to know I wasn't being the son, the brother, the uncle, and the friend that I wanted to be. I felt I was letting Jesus down. My relationship was pretty much non-existent. I wasn't a very good person. I felt more and more isolated as my chemical dependency progressed. I spent a great deal of my time (when I wasn't faking how wonderful life was on the outside) alone at home, usually drunk. I lived alone so I could kind of get away with it. I wasn't accountable to anybody. I could lie my way through canceling social engagements. I could lie to my parents. I could lie to my brother and my friends. I hated who I was. I hated myself, and it would go on this way for a few more years.

I now praise God that He made my sin real to me. My brother got a phone call that he had lost a very good friend of his in another city to addiction. My brother instantly turned his car around and drove to my home. He woke me from a stupor and told me that he wasn't going to lose me that way. I agreed to get help and I struggled to maintain my sobriety for several months. But I was relapsing and relapsing. I couldn't stop. I was addicted. The turning point came for me when Christian brothers at my side finally helped me come to believe that God can pull us out of anything.

I opened my Bible, this time not to just study it but to listen to it. I was taught that the power of God and His salvation wasn't just something I could believe was true, Jesus created me and us to experience it. The Gospel captured my imagination. God turned my self-centered anguish into a resurrection-centered view of reality that I had been blind to in my addiction. I can now look back and see a purpose in the suffering that I went through. I can understand its value. Now it's easy to see how God uses our suffering to draw us nearer to Him. Jesus told me, "I want my joy to be inside of you so that your joy may be complete" [John 15:11].

Oh, yeah! I want that! I need that! Lord, show me how. I was reborn that day. I surrendered. The blessings of Jesus were written all over my life even in my darkest days but I had yet to really taste and see His grace. The Gospel tells us that salvation is not achieved as I learned the hard way, it's received the *really* hard way, through the death of our Lord Jesus. I used to think the greatest gift bestowed on me was the removal, complete and utter removal, of this obsession that was killing me. I continue to understand and experience that it is far more. Thank you. [Clapping.]

Let us spur one another on to love and good deeds. Could I just share with you, we do not spur one another on to love and good deeds by telling everybody how neat our lives has been or how great we are doing. It's when we offer somebody else the privilege of saying, "Tell me what's really happening." When we say to one another, "I cannot do this." When we tell the story, "I was down in the pit and God drew me up." Let us spur one another on, surrounded by Christian brothers.

In August of 2009 Tim heard the voice of Jesus, calling him to life. The author of Hebrews says, "Let us draw near to God with sincere hearts and we will be washed clean. Let us profess the hope that we have for the future. When we come together, let us consider how we may spur one

another on toward love and good deeds.” When we do come together, let’s see the blessings of God.

Lord Jesus, I thank You that just as You asked Your first followers to gather together, when we gather together, You are there. Your Spirit brings love and life and forgiveness and hope. I thank You for this season of Thanksgiving that we might tell other people the stories of Your faithfulness to us. That in our brokenness, Your strength is made perfect and Your grace can set us free. I ask You to bless all those who will travel this week that they might hear stories. I ask You to bless all those who are empty this week that Your grace might fill them. And I ask that we would come here again and draw near to You with sincere hearts and have You, the author and perfecter of our faith, strengthen our hearts. In the Name of the Father, in the Name of the Son, in the Name of the Holy Ghost, we give thanks. 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.