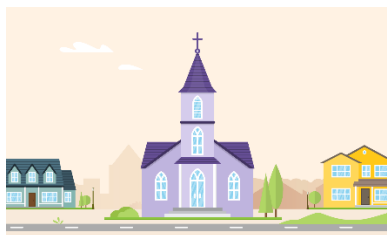


All the more,  
as you see the Day approaching.

I was driving home  
from a worship committee mtg  
with the girls a few nights ago.  
We passed through an intersection  
and some friends we know live nearby  
—we'll call them Adam and Eve.  
And because we'd just been at the church for a mtg,  
the girls wanted to know  
where Adam and Eve went to church.

I hesitated for a moment,  
trying to think of way to soften the truth.  
*I don't think Adam and Eve go to church—I said.*  
***What?!***  
Came the uproar from the back seat;  
they were a bit incredulous.  
And then came the question that I hope,  
not just the pastor's kids ask,  
“How can they not go to church, mom?!?”



It wasn't a question laced with feeling being slighted  
because right now  
they have no choice but to go,  
theirs was more a question  
with no frame of reference  
—they really didn't understand,  
how can someone **not go** to church?

How can someone **not belong**  
to a group a people who,  
as Hebrews mentions,  
“...meet together,  
as is the habit of some, encouraging one another...”  
How can you **not be connected**  
to other Christians like we are?

Here’s to the Day approaching  
where your world expands a little, kiddos.

I’m one of those people that during covid,  
I started getting The New York Times Newsletter  
emailed to me.  
The newsletter has top stories and snippets  
from selections in the larger paper.  
And earlier in the week, on Tuesday,  
they had a short article called,  
‘On the Phone Alone’  
—which dealt with the mental health of adolescents.  
Now I’m not sure why I stopped to read it.  
Curiosity?  
Provocation from the Spirit?



Because it was Tuesday.  
I hadn’t written my sermon yet.  
I’m just having my coffee in the morning  
before anyone gets up,  
curiously reading from a very secular newspaper  
with no religious agenda or mention—  
I’m just reading a short piece  
on the mental health of teens,

and the *act of going to church*  
came up twice.

“What seems undeniable, [a researcher] points out,  
is that surging use of digital technology  
has changed life’s daily rhythms.

It has led adolescents to spend less time  
on in-person activities, like dating,  
hanging out with friends  
and attending church.”<sup>1</sup>

Here’s to the Day  
of having the Spirit speak to you  
through the newspaper.

The article goes on to say,  
“If you’re not getting some outdoor relief time  
and enough sleep - any human being is challenged.  
When you get the pubescent brain  
involved in that equation,  
you are talking about somebody being really,  
really challenged to feel  
contented and peaceful and happy  
with the world around them.

“[When Adolescents] have too much screen time,  
they’re not sleeping,  
[and they are] on phones all the time,” (says) Dr. Melissa Dennison,  
a pediatrician in central Kentucky  
who sees many unhappy adolescents.  
Dennison regularly encourages her patients (get this)  
to take walks outdoors or attend church.”<sup>2</sup>

I almost spit out my coffee.  
Of all the socially engaging activities

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<sup>1</sup> David Leonhardt, New York Times, [https://messaging-custom-newsletters.nytimes.com/template/oakv2?campaign\\_id=9&emc=edit\\_nn\\_20220510&instance\\_id=60927&nl=the-morning&productCode=NN&regi\\_id=104604841&segment\\_id=91787&te=1&uri=nyt%3A%2F%2Fnewsletter%2F0e9bf2ed-96b6-57c5-a470-aac2e2969ca8&user\\_id=5ae2c13403ad803aae6d7637af81966b](https://messaging-custom-newsletters.nytimes.com/template/oakv2?campaign_id=9&emc=edit_nn_20220510&instance_id=60927&nl=the-morning&productCode=NN&regi_id=104604841&segment_id=91787&te=1&uri=nyt%3A%2F%2Fnewsletter%2F0e9bf2ed-96b6-57c5-a470-aac2e2969ca8&user_id=5ae2c13403ad803aae6d7637af81966b)

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

these researchers and doctors could have chosen,  
the act of *going to church*  
is both shockingly out of place and yet,  
intentionally mentioned twice  
in a piece about mental health in adolescents.  
“Let us not neglect to meet together as is the habit of some...”

Here’s to the Day approaching  
where going to church  
is a mental health priority.



A few weeks ago,  
our Sunday morning Comeback Class,  
one of our adult spiritual formation classes,  
explored the question,  
why go to church.  
I told the class it was likely a little unfair that,  
as a pastor, I was leading the lesson  
and having to ask this question.  
But the class was open and honest.

Answers to why go to church  
varied from things like I grew up going to church.  
I want my children to know these stories.  
I really enjoy the people and fellowship and  
opportunities for service,  
lots of good things like that.

When I asked the question,  
okay why would you not come to church  
—the biggest answer was time,  
meaning there isn’t enough of it,

or our family just got out the of the habit,  
or coming when kids were small  
was so taxing.

Now asking that question  
is somewhat one-sided—  
I mean I was asking a group of people  
already at church why or why not they go,  
So, on Thursday I posted the question to Facebook:  
why go to church or why not go to church.  
But you know what?  
I know too many people who love their church.

Here's to the Day approaching where that is a good thing.

Naturally, I learned more  
from the people who said,  
here's why I don't go—  
here's why I'm not a member  
of a church anymore.  
Most of those responses are what you expect:  
judgmentalism  
feeling left out  
or not understanding the culture  
and the insider language;  
the feeling that the church focuses only about sin  
and how bad we are;  
feeling that children are disruptive  
instead of welcomed;  
a notion that you can get your spiritual enrichment  
from others around  
and don't need the church for that.

A Gallup poll from 2007 stated,  
“In every study of church attendance,  
more old[er] people do church than young,  
more women than men,  
more southerners and upper-Midwesterners  
than New Englanders or Westerners,

more brown-skinned people  
than white-skinned people (per capita)  
and more evangelicals and Mormons  
than other denominations.”<sup>3</sup>

That was 15 years ago.

A Gallup study in 2020

noted that church membership  
was in a state of decline.

In 1937 when Gallup began measuring  
the religious membership in a church, mosque, or synagogue,  
around 73% of population  
affirmed their church membership.

It stayed that way for about six decades  
all the way into the 90’s.

In 1999, it was 70%--

then at the turn of the century it dipped.

By 2018 it was at 50%

and now we are at 47% of the population  
claim to have membership in a church, synagogue, or mosque.<sup>4</sup>

It sounds depressing.

And there are lots of reasons why there is a decline.

But in a way, talking about  
church attendance and membership  
is still “preaching to the choir”

*(that’s an idiom Arlie, 3<sup>rd</sup> graders have been learning about idioms),*

it’s preaching to the choir

because you’re already here,  
you all are worship with us online.

But in today’s world,

the church falls prey  
to culture like everything else.

Don’t we feel like we need to sell ourselves a little?

That we need something catchy

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<sup>3</sup> <https://news.gallup.com/poll/27124/just-why-americans-attend-church.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>

to attract new members  
or draw in our neighbors  
...how can we entice Adam and Eve to be a part of our church?  
A Hidden Brain episode I listened to this week  
is calling humans, homo-economicus  
instead of homo sapiens.<sup>5</sup>

Here's to the Day approaching  
where this is an uphill climb.



And then there is Hebrews.

This sometimes-preachy book in scripture  
that in chapter 10 says,  
we should prod each other  
to do good in the world  
and this prodding can be done when meet together.  
Hebrews says we are to provoke,  
we are to provoke to the point  
of irritation and exasperation,  
each other to do good deeds.<sup>6</sup>

Somehow, the answer to why go to church  
is to be irritating.

Here's to the Day  
where some of us are better at this  
than others.

The reality is  
there will always be good and valid reasons  
to go to church.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://hiddenbrain.org/podcast/our-better-angels/>

<sup>6</sup> Katherine A. Shaner, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revision-common-lectionary/ordinary-33-2/commentary-on-hebrews-1011-14-15-18-19-25-4>

And there will always be valid and good reasons  
not to go to church.

So, perhaps our habit of meeting together

**in here**

is so that we can be less homo-economicus  
and more Imago Dei

**out there.**

Because the one thing you can't miss

is that somehow being the church  
equals being together,

and that means together

we are somehow better.

**We are better together than we are alone.**

We learned that in a big way

in these last two years, didn't we?

One of the best comments on my Facebook post  
about why go to church

was when someone commented,

[because] "I am a recovering jerk

and I need to remember

to be kind and compassionate to others

because God is kind and compassionate to me."

Here's to the Day approaching

where someone besides me is the center.

Hebrews is clear,

and talking to us,

a group of Christians,

"<sup>23</sup>Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope  
without wavering,

for he who has promised is faithful."

As the church we confess hope to the world.

We don't confess sin to the world.

We don't confess that we have *the* truth,

the whole truth,

and nothing but the truth



so, help us God.  
We confess hope.  
The church confesses hope  
without wavering  
hope in Christ  
who promises to be faithful to the world.

<sup>24</sup>And let us consider *how*  
to provoke one another  
to love and good deeds,  
<sup>25</sup>not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some,  
but encouraging one another,  
and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

This isn't a sermon about convincing anyone  
to come to church.  
It isn't a sermon filled with facts  
about why people don't come to church.  
It is only a reminder that  
the world may not need to be converted  
or evangelized to be just like us.

It is a reminder that the world  
might need to hear our confession of hope.

It is a reminder to be less  
homo-economicus.

It is a reminder that coming together  
is good for mental health.

It is a reminder that the world needs our good deeds  
and our encouraging word.

Our church may meet together,  
as is the habit,  
so that we exasperate each other  
to build a kind of community  
...that relentlessly, even irritatingly, suggests  
actions of love and deeds of goodness...

that is the responsibility of the church.<sup>7</sup>

Here's to the Day approaching...

### **Benediction**

Melvin Meares this week  
reminded me of a game we used to play,  
if you can call it a game,  
we used to play on mission trips.

If someone was reading on their cot,  
or had just closed their eyes  
and laid down after a long day,  
we would creep up to that person and say,  
“What rhymes with nylon and starts with a p?”  
Anyone?  
You shout, *pile on*,  
and pile onto that person.  
You literally smother  
them with bodies.

Here's to the Day when irritating chants  
of what rhymes with nylon and starts with a p  
—lead to good deeds and actions of love.

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<sup>7</sup> ibid