

Why Church?

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Sermon By: Roy G. Pollina †

With every sermon I preach, I attempt to be faithful to the message of Holy Scripture. In preparation, I begin with prayer that I may see in the readings what God would have me preach in my sermon. This desire to preach from the texts of the Old Testament, Psalm, Epistle and Gospel does not prevent certain themes from reoccurring.

By now, some of you may have noticed that underlying many of the messages of the day in my sermons has been a recurring theme about the importance of the church in our lives. The reason for this is simple:

1. Encouraging and increasing membership in a church – active membership -- and, encouraging and increasing attendance at worship services – regular attendance, these are the goals of the:
 - National Episcopal Church
 - Diocese of Southwestern Virginia
 - Vestry of Christ Episcopal Church in MartinsvilleAnd,
2. More importantly, to the depths of my soul, I believe the Church is important. I believe the church is important to your salvation, my salvation and to the salvation of those who do not now have a church.

In our collect for today, we pray, *“Almighty God, whose Son our Savior Jesus Christ is the light of the world: Grant that your people, illumined by your Word and Sacraments, may shine with the radiance of Christ's glory, that he may be known, worshipped, and obeyed to the ends of the earth.”*

The prayer is almost an instructive formula. God's people receive God's Word and Sacrament. One definition for a true church is where the Word is preached and the sacraments administered. So, our prayer asks God to get his people to church for Word and Sacrament. Then, the prayer asks that God's Word and

Sacrament, working in God's people, will inspire others to worship and obey God. The worship, I assume, being done at church where the Word is preached and the Sacraments are administered.

It is our hope and prayer that the joy you have in your life because of Jesus Christ will shine through and others, who do not know Jesus or the joy he brings, will want what you have. I encourage those who are able and prepared, to confess the faith that is in them and witness to the blessings of knowing Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. However, if such evangelizing seems to intimidating for you (and it is for many Episcopalians) I recommend the Apostle Philip method of Evangelizing – 3 words – “Come and see.” I believe what your friends will see when they come to worship at Christ Episcopal Church, will make them a better person. I think they will “see” the answer to the problems that have been troubling them.

Two weeks ago, I spent three days and two nights in New York City. This was my first real trip to New York other than airports and train stations. While there I was reminded of a Silent Retreat that I attended many years ago. The reason for my reminiscing will become clear in a moment.

The retreat was led by the Rector of St. Paul's K-Street in Washington, DC, the Reverend Andrew Sloane. Father Sloane is English born and Oxford educated although at that point in his life he had spent as many years in the USA as in Britain. Father Sloane had an interesting career as a priest serving in South Africa, New York and Wisconsin before going to D.C.

Fr. Sloane told of his days at St. Mary the Virgin off Time Square in New York City. (I spent a few hours wandering around Time Square trying not to appear too much a gawking tourist.) Father Sloane spoke about the view from his office at St. Mary the Virgin, which was a parking lot. He spoke of the canyon made by the towering buildings surrounding him limiting his office view to about 50 feet.

From the center of the huge metropolis of New York City, Father Sloane was called to church in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. (I have been there too. It is about 80 miles north of Milwaukee). It happened one day shortly after he arrived in Sheboygan that Father Sloane had a conference at a church some distance in the Wisconsin countryside. It was late fall and the crops had all been harvested and as he was being driven to his destination, Father Sloane looked out his window and there standing out against the stark background of an endless horizon was a big, lonely barn. All by itself – just there. Father Sloane stated he looked around and every direction was unobstructed to the horizon, except as for that single barn. At that moment, Father Sloane realized how long it had been -- living in the canyons of New York City -- how long it had been since he had an unobstructed view of the horizon. How stark one building looks when viewed all by itself.

Outside this church building is a world that can clutter your vision of what is truly important, truly necessary. The world has towering edifices of ambition, of consumerism, or physical pleasures, or false hopes and false dreams. Admittedly, there are many good things in the world but often amidst the clutter they are hard to find and often are overlooked. It can be like being in a big city looking for a store or restaurant less than one block away, but if you are on the wrong street, you can be less than 100 feet from it and not know it's there.

Church is like the open fields of Wisconsin. You come here to remove the clutter and see clearly what is in every direction. At church, as nowhere else, you get to be you. You talk to God; God talks to you. God does not talk to the mother, father, sister, brother, son, daughter, student, employee, employer, captain, lawyer, merchant, chief or whatever you may be. None of that clutter here. Here, you talk to your Father in heaven and here, your Father speaks to his child. Here you get good gifts; forgiveness of your sins. Here you get the Body and the Blood of Christ to nourish and strengthen your soul. Here and only here, at

church, is beauty and elegance found nowhere else in the world.

The second night of the retreat, I left my room for the 7:00 pm spiritual talk only to find that I was a half hour early. It was a pleasant night so I started to walk down the road away from the lights of the conference center, past a pond, to the end of a field; it was pitch dark. I looked up to heaven and saw the most beautiful winter night sky I had ever seen. Away from the haze and reflected lights of the city, I could see stars and constellations that, in my 50-some years, I had never seen. Those stars had always been there. They were waiting for me to go to a place where they would finally be noticed.

While writing this I am reminded of one of my favorite songs from the 70's by Cat Stevens. Growing up in the East End of London where the lights from the city block out the shining stars, Cat Stevens found himself one night on a remote beach in Spain. There was a full moon. He looked down and saw, for the first time, something he did not even know existed – a moonshadow. So taken by his discovery, Cat Stevens went back to his room and wrote, "Moonshadow".

My friends, there are spiritual gifts and mysteries all around you, waiting to be noticed. You may see a few of the brighter ones out there. But, come in here with Holy people and feed on Holy food and you will begin to see wonders you cannot now imagine.

That's the message I want you to take to your unchurched friends. They will never know until they've seen it for themselves.

May God lead all of us to lead others here, to church. *Amen.*