

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, May 20, 2018
The Rev. Dr. David Thompson

“Why Join a Church?”

Texts: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom (Proverbs)

Wisdom is vindicated by all her children (Jesus)

Two Presbyterian friends passed by a Catholic Church on which a large poster addressed non-Catholics: "Come to us, join the Roman Catholic church and you instantly get \$30,000 in cash!" While walking away, the two Presbyterian friends became engaged in a debate about whether the offer was meant seriously. A week later the two friends met again in front of the same church, and one of them confided to the other: "I am still wondering if that offer is serious." The other replied condescendingly: "All you think about is money! All you Presbyterians are the same."

It is a proverb not to judge a book by its cover. When you are on the outside looking in you might hear the following:

Why join a church? How does a church differ from a service club? Do people become members simply because their parents were members? Isn't joining a church a form of intellectual suicide? Hasn't science proved that we are alone in the universe? Isn't the church irrelevant to today's needs? Isn't it more fun to golf rather than go to church on a Sunday? Isn't the church full of hypocrites? Doesn't religion cause war? Why on earth would you ever consider joining a church??

Why?

For Wisdom!

When we join a church we identify with several streams of history.

Judaism is several thousand years old. When we join the Christian Church, we become immersed in the Jewish tradition in the form of its Scriptures. We travel with Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon Isaiah and the prophets. The Jewish sacred books become our sacred books and the accumulated wisdom of the Jewish history becomes available to us.

It is often said that those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat the mistakes of history.

The Roman Catholic Church is 2000 years old. When we join a congregation like New St. James we become Roman Catholics in the same way as we become Jewish. The books that the Roman Catholic Church identified as sacred books in the first five hundred years of her history, became our sacred books. We have a lot of history to learn from the Roman Catholics.

Those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat the mistakes of history.

When someone joins New St. James there is the stream of Protestant history of Luther, Calvin and Knox who all preached that we must be true to the roots of Christianity or we shall not be Christian. There are now some four centuries of Protestant history that we identify with.

Those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat the mistakes of history.

Somewhere in this vast history of the Jews, Catholics and Protestants nearly every mistake that can be made has been made and commented upon.

Perhaps you have applied for a job only to discover that experience was required. They didn't want you until you had made mistakes and learned from them. Failure is a very strong way to learn, often painful but nearly always effective.

When we join a church, we join an institution that has been learning from failure for a very long time. The proof of this is the fact that churches survive as institutions for incredibly long periods of time and they do so very often with vigour.

There is something mysterious and wonderful about the Church, something or someone that explains its vigour century after century. The thing that ties all the streams of history together for wisdom is simply this assertion:

THE FEAR OF THE LORD IS THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM.

Why join a church, for that Wisdom!

2nd)

We join a church for moral values. I have a friend who is a lawyer and he said to me after studying Western Law that it all in some way can be traced back to the Ten Commandments. Think about it... Thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour, thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not covet. Then pick up any newspaper or news cast and read or listen. What is it about? Nearly all of it is about breaking these laws and what happens to society when we do.

Drunk driving, rising auto insurance rates, scams on the internet, the arms race, fatal school shootings, driving trucks down sidewalks and killing people who you don't know etc.

As the Philosopher Nietzsche was to argue, belief in God is the cornerstone of morality. Take that belief in morals away and the fabric of our society begins to collapse. There is suddenly no compelling reason to follow the directives of the Ten Commands anymore is there?

We can begin to justify killing innocent persons as the terrorists do for a cause. We can justify paper crime because the rich do it, why shouldn't we? We can justify adultery- "I was lonely or sexually frustrated at the time"- and so it goes on. Forgetting the command not to kill, I can rework my concept of God and Kill in God's name to make my God happy. Mistake there, is that we are made in God's image and God is not made in our image, despite what the Jihadists argue. Crime increases, neighborhood watch is set up. People secretly carry guns concealed on their person. In the States the first amendment takes precedence over the Ten Commands and the NRA lobbies congress to keep it that way.

Isn't that what is happening to our world?

Why join a Church? To slow the moral rot down by becoming the salt of the earth that savours the stew. Why join the church? To provide a place where our children can learn about goodness and high moral values. We join a community that is committed to loving one's neighbour instead of robbing him blind, or coveting his wealth or his wife or husband or even one day killing him or her.

Where else can our children receive the moral reinforcement to become good citizens? High school, University, the media? What do you think?

3rd) Why would you want to join a church?

For answers to the great questions around Hope and meaning and connection, the universe and life after death.

Are we alone in the universe? How did we come to exist? Is there any meaning to life? What is the secret of happiness? Is life only heartbreak and eventual despair? Is there life after this life? Does God exist?

The church is a community which cares about answers to ultimate questions- questions about life, questions about death. People join churches today for three main reasons: For Hope, for meaning and for Connection to others, for love. People in churches that are salt of the earth don't give up easily. They are curious. They want to know. They respond to truth wherever they find it. And they know how to love!

As Pascal once said and I paraphrase him; if at the end of life there is no God, no hope, no meaning, no beauty, no goodness, no life after this life, no reunion with those who have passed away whom we have loved so... then we will have lost NOTHING! But if as the church affirms century after century that all these things do exist including God, then they will gain everything. They will look back on their lives and know that when their neighbour was in trouble that they were there for them, when people needed comfort they were able to extend that comfort that special hug, that gift of food. That gift of a flower to say "It's going to be alright somehow...All things work together for good!"

When people were sick we visited them, when they were hungry we fed them, when they were thirsty we were there to give them water, when they were in jail, we visited them- and those who did these things with their lives, when it comes their time to die, they will be at peace! What a gift!!

Why would you join the church?

For Wisdom, for moral values for hope and meaning and connection!

But why join New St. James?

This is what one family said when they joined the church

The church made us feel at home here!

Nobody tried to pressure us into a commitment or a creed.

Our children were welcomed in the church.

We felt the meaning of Easter here and the meaning of Christmas and the rhythm of the church year gave meaning to our lives.

Most of all the spoken words given in the prayers, scripture readings and sermons had immediate relevance for our lives. Indeed, one family said: It has been uncanny at times how the sermons have addressed issues confronting us at the very time when they were given. There is something substantial to build on whether one agrees or not.

People who join New St. James say that this is where they feel at home, and where they belong. It is something they often cannot put into words. It is something felt at a deep level.

One last word. The proverb about not judging a book by the cover also applies to the church. For instance you can't tell anything about the Bible from its cover, yet it is by far the world's best-selling book. It is not about whether its leather bound or a paperback, it is what we discover in the Bible that can utterly change our lives.

Similarly the church is something you cannot judge by outward appearance. It's what is inside that matters. It's the people, their values, their ability to love and their compassion and kindness that really matters.

I know one church member who loves raspberry pie. She bought one at the church bazaar. Then she asked herself "Should I share it or eat it myself?" She had the battle inside herself and decided to share. She was outside, saw her neighbor who had done so much for her and asked him whether he liked raspberry pie and he said that he loved it. So she gave it to him.

The next evening her neighbor brought over a note from his wife. Her brother had been unwell for a year and the diagnosis had come Multiple Myeloma. “You have no idea, how much that gift of a raspberry pie meant to us, coming when it did.” Deep bonds are made like this. A great church makes these caring bonds through kindness.

Let me tell you a Bible cover story.

A young man who came from an affluent neighborhood in the States was about to graduate. In that affluent neighborhood parents often gave their grads a car to celebrate their graduation. Bill and his dad had spent months looking for a suitable car and the week before graduation they found the perfect car. Bill was certain that the car would be his, on Graduation night.

His disappointment was total on the evening before, when his well-meaning father handed him a gift-wrapped Bible. Judging by the cover only, and sensing that his father was trying to teach him some kind of a lesson, Bill was so angry that he threw the Bible down and stormed out of the house. He didn't come back and never saw his father again.

It was the news of his father's death that brought him back to the house. One night going through his father's possessions, he came across the Bible his father had given him. He opened it to find a piece of paper inside it, dated for the day of his graduation. It was a cashier's check in the exact amount of the car they had chosen together.

Don't make the mistake of prejudging whether or not you might join a church based on externals: It's what's inside that matters: the love, the compassion, the deep caring when your life falls apart, it's the raspberry pie when your brother gets Melanoma, its help when you are a refugee; it's the search for meaning for hope and for loving authentic connection.

The best reason of all for joining the church is summed up in the first line of the next hymn:

God is here!

You see it's not what's inside a church, but WHO!

Thanks be to God!