

“Called Together”

Nehemiah 8:8-10, 1Corinthians 12:12-20

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One Sunday morning, a mother went in to wake her son and tell him it was time to get ready for church, to which he replied, "I'm not going." "Why not?" she asked. "I'll give you two good reasons," he said. "One, they don't like me, and Two, I don't like them." His mother replied, "I'll give YOU two good reasons why YOU SHOULD go to church. One, you're 59 years old, and Two, you're the pastor!"

This morning, I would like to talk about “church.” Why do we come to church? It sounds silly, but it is important to think about the meaning of church and the purpose of why we come and join this church, this faith community. I figure that probably some of us just come to church as a part of routine or a part of life, like a “Sunday ritual” as a Christian. Others may come to seek God for spiritual growth or to search for community and a sense of belonging through fellowship. How else do you define “church” if you are asked to describe it in one word? The answers could be like these: Family, Spirituality, and People. I hope to share much deeper meaning of church as a faith community from God’s perspective. Why on earth are we here together every Sunday?

Everyone is different. We might have different personalities, political stances, genders, ethnicities, and worldviews; but mysteriously we are here together to worship God. Isn’t it amazing? I know that by your will, you have chosen to come and join this church, but I believe God called you here to join this church. While I was working on my sermon reading and reflecting upon today’s Scripture readings, I kept thinking about the meaning of church. Our Scripture readings spoke and challenged me to think about the purpose of church as a spiritual community. If you ask me the same question, the definition of church in one word is “calling”. We are “called together” by God. When I say, “calling”, it is much deeper meaning than the meaning of job or task. It talks about more fundamental and original purpose from our creator God. I believe that we are here not by an accident, but God has a special purpose for you and for this church. And we have responded to God’s invitation. Imagine you make or create something. You do not make something without any purpose. In the same way, when God created you and this church, God had a great wish and desire for us. Our faith journey is here to find out God’s special plan and purpose and carry it in our acts and service. It is the same to individuals and to our church community.

Our Old Testament reading describes a story about the reconstruction of Israel after a return from Babylonia. Many Israelites were taken to Babylon as captives after their Jerusalem was destroyed. The Israelites used to enjoy the blessings of God: a promised land, safety, abundance and prosperity; but they lost their land, no security and were war exiles in a foreign land for over fifty years. After the Persian Empire took power, the king allowed the Israelites to return to their country. Nehemiah and Ezra were their spiritual leaders and commissioned to rebuild their country. Nehemiah was an excellent administrator and builder and Ezra was a great scribe. They organized the new plans to rebuild the temple and Jerusalem city walls. It was a sort of “great renewal project” for the entire country. They encouraged the people saying, “This day is holy to God, your God. Don’t weep and carry on. Don’t feel bad, the joy of God is our strength.” The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann has mentioned that when the Israelites relied on God, they were close and responsive to God. But when they had their own way, they relied on their pleasures and forgot God as their creator. They became careless, cynical about their faith and ended up exiles in Babylonia. Nehemiah’s advice was that the joy of God is our strength and reminds us the importance of our spiritual relationship with God.

Church is a faith community built upon the spiritual relationship with God. Paul gives us an interesting metaphor using the parts of our body. For example, feet, ears, hands and eyes are different parts. Each seems to be differently made and originally designed for different roles, but we have to see a bigger picture of the whole body. If the foot would say, because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body, but this would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body. This wouldn’t make sense to the body. As it is, there are many members, yet one body. Ironically, Paul challenges us in this way. If all were a single member, where would the body be? On the contrary, the members of the body seem to be weak and individually separable. But our parts of the body are *meaningful* when they are called to work and serve for the whole body’s purpose and movement.

Just as the body is one and has many members, there are many different interests, spiritual focuses, and diverse perspectives in our church ministries. It is natural and good, because each of us is different, special and unique. Apostle Paul was keenly aware of his church’s situation. There was some confusion with different voices and opinions inside the Corinthian faith community. But this would apply to our modern church context as well. He gave advice to his church people that church is the body of Christ and individuals are members of it.

In our church, God gives different gifts to all of us. For example, some have a passion for reconciling ministries; others, a passion for welcoming newcomers. Others, a gift for providing group support for those who are in need of compassion and understanding their sadness and grief. There are those of us who work for the good use of our church campus. Some have passions for inspiring our worship experience and outreach ministries. We also have passions for adult spiritual education and for our young people's ministries, but we are inspired by the one and same Spirit which gives *each* person their unique and different perspective. Christ made sure that in the one Spirit, we were all baptized into one body and all made to drink of one Spirit. So what is our mission? As the church, we always have to be sensitive to this question.

Our Scripture readings gave us a couple of insights into God's community: who we are, what we are expected to do and to whom we are accountable. As Nehemiah advised, God is our strength. With this strength, we do discern God's purpose through our church ministries. Don't get me wrong. I am personally very proud of our church because of our spiritual relationship with God. Also because of our friendly and welcoming spirit and great ministries that are already serving our community. Our message this morning is the reminder that we are called together as one body for God's ministry.

I hope that our church is aware of God's calling and mission and continue to carry on. Every Sunday, we are truly rejoicing and celebrating our worship service as one body inspired by the guidance of the Spirit and voices of challenges through God's words, music and prayers in our gathering. Amen.