

“Why Church? The Truth About Us”

Reading: Amos 5:6-15; Hebrews 4:12-16

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

I have a tripod for my camera that I've been grumbling about for as long as I've had it. I got the tripod secondhand, so I shouldn't complain too much, but the part that attaches to the camera itself has always been painfully hard to work. You have to push a button while moving a little lever to get it to work, and it has always stuck to the point that it requires a lot of force to move it. There have even been times when I've cut my knuckles trying to get the lever to move. So the other day I decided to try to put some oil on the mechanism and see if that makes things work better, and I was looking at it closely to decide if I could take the mechanism apart and maybe clean it out and get it properly oiled up. And in the process I realized that I've been doing it wrong all along. In my defense, it did need oil and it didn't come with an instruction manual, so this is not purely an example of me ignoring the instructions. But after years of grumbling and bashed knuckles, I really wish I had realized earlier that I must be doing things wrong.

It's probably safe to say that not many of us enjoy finding out that we're wrong about something, but it's also true that in general, we're better off learning how to do it right. There's not necessarily anything wrong with being wrong, so to speak; what matters is being humble enough to learn from mistakes and not insist that you were right all along. There's nothing so sad as someone who thinks that refusing to admit their mistakes makes them look stronger; in reality it just makes them look petty. You may think it makes you look as solid and strong as a rock, but really it just makes you look as hard-headed as one. It's better to learn and grow. It's better to learn how things are meant to be done, rather than risk hurting yourself or breaking something or looking like a fool. Hopefully you've learned at some point in your life not to be that kind of fool, though if you're anything like me, you may still have a relapse from time to time.

Our theme in our Scripture readings and sermons these days is “Why Church?” We're spending time in the book of Hebrews looking for answers to why on earth we would spend time doing church things when there are so many other options for ways to spend your time these days. Why church, when there's so much else to be done? Why church, when so much of the rest of the world seems to have moved on from the concept of religion? Why church, when the church has so many problems? Last Sunday we made the point that Jesus is the real answer to the question. It seems like a cop-out; of course we're going to say that Jesus is the answer, but the point is that He is so much greater than anything else we might devote our lives to that once you have encountered the risen Christ, He is all the reason you need for church. But there are other reasons, as the book of Hebrews continues to indicate. We don't have time to be exhaustive or systematic in answering this question; many other people have made systematic arguments for the existence of God or the authority of the Bible through the years. We're not being that systematic; we're just diving deep into the book of Hebrews.

And we learn that another one of the answers to our question is because the message of the church tells us the truth about ourselves. Why church? Because the gospel of Jesus Christ acknowledges the reality that I'm not okay, that I'm doing life wrong, and that I can't fix myself. It's not comfortable to hear that I'm doing it wrong, but it's needed, and in the long run, it's good. The

church gives each of us the opportunity to stop living the foolish life of futility and dissipation that we so often fall into apart from God. That can be a hard message to hear, but it's good.

We read just a few verses out of Hebrews chapter 4, and some of them are pretty oft-quoted. Verse 12 says, "the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." That verse is often quoted to refer to the Bible as the word of God, but that's not what the verse really means. It's really focusing on the commandments of God broadly speaking; God's moral judgments and expectations for our lives. The fact of the matter is that the word of God is sometimes uncomfortable for us, but like surgery, it's needed to make us healthy. Dividing soul from spirit, joint from marrow, truth from falsehood, good from evil, wisdom from foolishness, is necessarily a painful process. The point is that there is such a thing as right and wrong; God does care what we do with our lives, and He does hold us accountable if we willfully reject His instructions. "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account."

And then there's a logical progression: Jesus acts as high priest. As we said last Sunday, the book of Hebrews draws from all kinds of images and characters and stories from the Old Testament and uses those images to make a point about who Jesus is, probably for the sake of convincing their audience to remain faithful to Jesus rather than turning back to old ways of belief. The book began by arguing that Jesus is far greater than just another angel because He is in fact God Himself revealed to us; this time the author is comparing Jesus' work with the work of the high priest. The Old Testament is full of instructions for religious worship, and most of those instructions are centered on the temple, where sacrifices were made and God was understood to have His throne room. But to get to that throne room you had to go through a series of gates and rooms, and each one was more restricted than the last. It was understood that not just anyone could march right in to stand before God, because everyone is guilty at some point of rebelling against God as their King. And in fact there was only one person who was allowed to go all the way into God's throne room itself, and even then, he was only allowed in once a year. That person was the high priest, the one to go between the people and God their King, to make things right when the people were wrong. The author of Hebrews is arguing that Jesus is the greatest and final high priest, that the work He did ushers us into the presence of God, and that no one else's work will ever be required for us to come to God.

The point is that you only need a high priest when you cannot approach God on your own. You only need a mediator, a go-between, an ambassador, a diplomat, when there's a separation or break or distance in your relationship. Why church? Because the church tells us the truth about ourselves, that we're not okay, that something is wrong with each and every one of us, and the heart of that problem is that we need a high priest to get close to the God we were made to know and love. We are immortal creatures who have cut ourselves off from the source of life. So we do church together because we can be honest about our failures and shortcomings, and in our honesty, healing can begin. We begin to approach our mediator by admitting our need for Him.

The point the author of Hebrews is trying to make about Jesus as our high priest is not only that we have a need for a mediator — the people hearing this book the first time it was read would have already accepted that — the point is that Jesus is the only mediator we need. Every other way of getting near to God, even if it's effective, is only effective for a short time. The author has already

made the point that Jesus is far superior to the angels, and in fact He is God Himself. But now the point is further that Jesus is also human. As God incarnate in human flesh, Jesus is the effective bridge between us and God. He is not so superior to the angels that He can't relate to us; on the contrary, He is also one of us, and He knows our struggles and temptations. And here is the hope: Jesus was tempted just like any other human is to rebel against God, and yet He remained without sin. There is hope; Jesus shows us that. Why church? Because the message of the church is the truth about us, that we are broken and separated from God, but there is hope.

This is a reason to be a part of the church because we so rarely hear the same answer elsewhere in our world. We have made an art out of denial. We're pathologically afraid of criticism in our world today. No one is ever wrong, and if I *am* ever wrong, trust me, I've got a list of excuses and extenuating circumstances to make sure it still isn't really my fault. We have a culture of passing the buck, blaming others, dissemination, and obscuring the facts. We can't even agree on what constitutes right from wrong, but we sure are quick to accuse others of wrongdoing, and they're just as quick to throw it back in our faces. And in that kind of a world, genuine confession and repentance is a powerful thing. Calling the wrong what it is — wrong — and asking for forgiveness, and then working toward that forgiveness, is practically unheard of. Why church? Because we tell people the truth about ourselves, that we were messed up, but that we're on the path to wholeness because of the work of Jesus.

The Bible describes a variety of effects that can come from needing a mediator to get to God but rejecting that mediator. If you don't know or don't care how to get to God, that has an effect on your life. The people of God have always told the truth about this, but we continue to see those effects in the world around us. The first and mildest effect is being subject to futility. It's chasing after the wind, meaninglessness, vanity. The world apart from God, just left on its own, is running down and reverting back to chaos. Things may work for now, but eventually they'll break; those are the facts. But beyond that, there's the moral effect of separation from God. Even when we want to do good, when we want to love others and make a contribution to the world, that futility creeps in and wears away at our good intentions. And so our virtues become infected with selfishness and pettiness and nastiness and greed. But then of course there's a third level beyond that, of active evil, when our infected virtues become spoiled. That's the truth of the gospel, too, that there is evil in the world, and much of it is committed by people. That evil was most clearly on display at the exact moment the love of God was most clearly on display: Jesus chose to die for us while the powers of the world lashed out to murder Him.

Why church? Because the message of the gospel that the church proclaims tells us the truth about the futility, selfishness, and evil of life apart from God. I'm not okay, and neither are you, so we might as well stop pretending otherwise. But where the world apart from God doesn't really have a decent offer of hope or transformation, the church offers us Jesus Christ as a mediator. Our need is life, and God is the source of life, and Jesus opens the way to us. So the question is not *why church*, the question is why we would settle for a pale imitation of true life. That life is possible: Jesus was tempted just like we are, but He remained without sin, so there is hope.

This truth about ourselves is not easy, but it's good, because there's hope. This is the work of diagnosing a problem. You can't know the solution until you know the problem. And so one of the ways that we tell this truth about ourselves is through the ancient practice of confession. Some

traditions have made more of a ritual out of it than others, and there's certainly a point at which we can obsess over our faults to an unhealthy degree. But the honesty of confessing our need for a high priest, a mediator, a savior, is the first step toward wholeness. And so we confess: sometimes as a church body, and often as individuals; sometimes verbally to one another, often in the privacy of our own hearts or times of prayer to God. We call our wrongs what they are, wrong, and allow our high priest to lead us. "Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 2.5 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/).