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**Summer Preaching Series: Questions of Faith**

***What About the Church?***  
***Why Bother with Church?***  
***Why Do I Need the Church?***

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A Sermon By  
The Rev. Andrew W. Walter

July 9, 2017  
Grace Episcopal Church  
Silver Spring, Maryland

*An audio version of this sermon may be found on the Grace Church website at*  
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/2017-07-09-AWW.mp3>.

**Summer Preaching Series: Questions of Faith**  
*What about the Church? Why Bother with Church? Why Do I Need Church?*

The Rev. Andrew W. Walter  
Grace Episcopal Church  
The Fifth Sunday After Pentecost  
July 9, 2017

When I was growing up, my family went to church every Sunday morning. My father was a man of deep faith, and he was very active in our church, serving as a Sunday School teacher, a Youth Group leader, a member of the church council. So, it seemed he almost always had something to do at church on Sunday mornings, but even if he didn't, even if he didn't have a specific commitment, we all went to church anyway, just so my father could usher, because he loved welcoming people to church. He loved being involved in his church.

Unfortunately, not everyone in our family shared my father's enthusiasm. At the time, I thought I had much more important things to do on Sunday morning, like sleeping, or watching television, or really, just about anything else, and so I tried everything I could to get out of going to church, everything from acting like I had all of this homework to do to pretending I was sick.

One time, when I was in middle school, I remember putting my face right next to my bedside reading lamp, thinking the heat from the lamp would increase my body temperature, making it look like I had a fever. I sat there for thirty minutes, waiting for my face to get all hot and sweaty and red, so my parents would take pity on me and I wouldn't have to go to church...

It didn't work, of course. My parents saw right through my scheme and I had go to church anyway. Apparently, I was not as clever in middle school as I thought I was. But, it just goes to show how I wanted nothing to do with church, or even faith, or religion, for that matter. It wasn't that important to me.

These days, a lot of people feel the same way. A recent study from the Pew Research Center shows that almost twenty-five percent of all Americans identify as what we call "nones," that is people who are agnostic, atheist, or "nothing in particular," and, if we look at the Millennial generation, that number increases to thirty-five percent<sup>1</sup>. Meanwhile, people who do consider themselves religious are not attending church like they used to do. In the Episcopal Church, average Sunday attendance has declined by over twenty-five percent in the last decade, and that trend holds across all mainline denominations. The median sized Episcopal Church has 61 people in church on Sundays – 61!

We all know why it's like this. We've probably all heard the reasons from our family and friends:

*I'm spiritual but not religious.*

*Church is boring.*

*The sermons are dull.*

*Christians are so hypocritical.*

*Christians are so judgmental.*

*All they do is talk about is money.*

*All they do is tell me how to live my life.*

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<sup>1</sup> Pew Research Center, 2014 Religious Landscape Study.

With so many people feeling this way, it's a perfect time to address today's questions in our summer preaching series: Questions of Faith, because today's questions are: *What about the Church? Why bother with Church? Why do I need Church?*

In order for us to answer these questions, we first have to reflect on what church is, because, I believe, there are a lot of misconceptions and unrealistic expectations of church.

A lot people out there only see the church as an institution, one that is centered in a certain kind of building and should embody their sense of who Jesus was, while providing services like Sunday worship and pastoral care, weddings and funerals, help for the poor and the needy, but when we look at the church in that way, when we look at the church as an institution, it is easy to become disappointed or disillusioned with church, because:

If we claim the church is all about the building, some will say, "I can find God outside."

If we claim the church embodies Jesus, some will say, "You're coming up short."

And, if we claim the church is worship and caring for others, some will say, "Your services are uninspiring, and I can care for people elsewhere."

The church can't ever fully live up to our expectations of what it should be. It's impossible. The church is going to make mistakes. It's bound to miss the mark. The church is not going please all the people all the time.

As the well-known preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor, says:

*There is no perfect church, anymore than there is a perfect God, if perfect means that I understand, agree, or approve of everything that goes on. If you become a Christian, you get a Bible that says God helped Joshua exterminate whole tribes of people right down to the last baby. You get a household code that makes wives subject to their husbands and tells husbands to sacrifice themselves for their wives... [And] if you become an Episcopalian, you get a national church heavy with all the usual bureaucracy. You get bishops who will not ordain women and people who still want to fight about the 1928 prayer book<sup>2</sup>.*

But, that's "The Church." That's what you get with the institution, which is why I try to look at the church in a different way. Rather than seeing the church as an institution, or a collection of buildings, or just what happens in worship on Sunday morning, I see the church as a community of people, a community of imperfect people, trying their best to make life a little better, for themselves and for others, and looking to God for some hope, and grace, and guidance.

That's what the church was in the very beginning from the moment Jesus called his first disciples. That small band of twelve was the foundation of the church, and, inspired and empowered by the Holy Spirit, the church grew and grew, as others joined in – men and women, young and old – all of them drawn to the way of Jesus. They came together in community after community, from small, rural villages to big, urban cities, to pray, to share a meal, to talk about Jesus. They lived in a way that was different from the prevailing culture. They took the time to listen to one another, and care for one another and to continue Christ's work and ministry. They didn't always get it right, but they tried their best to love their neighbor as themselves, to respect the dignity of every human being and to strive for justice and peace among all people, because that is what the church was, and is, and always will be: a group of people, a group of regular people, like you and me, trying to follow the way of Jesus and to share God's grace with each other, and those around us.

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church*.

So, then, getting back to today's questions: *What about the Church? Why bother with Church? Why do I need Church?*

Studies have shown that people who attend church regularly live happier and healthier lives, and that echoes something that Jesus himself said: *I have come that you might have life and have life abundantly.* Being part of a faith community makes our lives better, fuller, richer. The church community has a collective wisdom going back over two thousand years, a wisdom that helps us ponder and answer some of the most important, fundamental questions about life, like: Who is God? Who am I? What am I doing here? What is my purpose in life?

A faith community also helps keep us grounded and centered by connecting us with God, each other and the world around us. It's a place where we are welcomed and accepted for who we are, with all of our faults and our imperfections. It's a place where we are seen, and heard, and valued, things we don't get out there in the world, but something we all need. And, a faith community is a source of friendship, comfort and support, people to whom we can turn in the darkest, most difficult times in our lives.

For me, being part of a church community has changed my life in countless ways, making me a better husband, a better father, a better human being, and I believe that is true for anyone and everyone who becomes part of a faith community, which is why, I believe, we all need the church.

Amen.