



## Why, Church?

**Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21**

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Over the past decade, in the time I've been a pastor in the United Methodist Church, I've had a lot of conversations about the church. I've had conversations with church members about what it means to be a part of the church, or part of the faith community. I've had conversations with Bishops and District Superintendents about the polity and structure of the church. I've met with provisional pastors about their call to being ordained in the church. And, I've had a number of conversations with community members – people who have no affiliation with any church – about the history, theology, and work of the church.

Through these many conversations, conversations that total more hours than I can fathom to count, there is a common thread. Whether for good or for bad, there is a regular theme that pierces through these conversations. In the midst of every exchange I have about the church, there is a question that is inevitably asked – sometimes directly, other times lurking beneath the surface of the conversation. That question is, “Why[,] Church?”

Why Church?

It's the question our children ask at 9am on Sunday morning when we tell them it's time to get dressed to go: Why Church?

It's the question prospective pastors ask God when they feel a calling into the ministry: Why Church?

It's the question your boss may ask when you say you have somewhere to be at 6am on an Open Table Breakfast Morning: Why Church?

In these questions, and many more, the phrase is offered with just a single punctuation – the question mark at the end: Why Church? The question mark offers curiosity.

And yet, more times than not, when I've having these conversations about the church, the question presents itself with more than one punctuation. There is not *just* a question mark, but there is also a comma: Why, Church? ... The comma adds so much to the curiosity, and it invites much more reflection before we respond.

It's the comma that is inserted when the world is wondering why the church seems to be in bed with corruption and injustice: Why, Church?

It's the comma that indicates disdain for the church's complicity with social -isms, like the support of slavery and homophobia: Why, Church?

It's the comma that condemns the hypocrisy that is seen as defining of so many church goers: Why, Church?

The question mark, when found alone, invites the kind of conversations we like to have – it invites our sharing the good of the church. The question mark, by itself, invites us to express the joy and the love that has drawn *us* into the church.

But the comma invites something more. The comma asks for something that no simple response can offer. The comma ... this brief and momentary pause between why ... and ... church ... it asks for something deeper and more demanding than we might be able to offer in an elevator speech on why we belong to the church.

The comma, at the core of this question, invites a pause for reflection.

Today is Ash Wednesday, which marks the beginning of Lent. The season of Lent – like the comma – offers an invitation to pause for reflection and questioning.

It is believed that the season of Lent was implemented into the church following the Council of Nicea in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century as a time for the church to prepare itself for Easter. Lent is thus a 40-day season during which we are invited to reflect, repent, and rededicate ourselves to the work of God in the world – work that is celebrated at the conclusion of Lent in the holy remembrance of God's witness of love and life in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Our Lenten focus here at Washington Street is going to be on this question, Why, [comma] Church? We are going to use this season that invites a focus on our brokenness, to consider the brokenness of the church.

Tonight, as begin this journey on Ash Wednesday, I want to consider the question: Why, Church, are you so self-obsessed? ... Why does everything have to be about you?

My senior year at Wesley Theological Seminary, I was elected as the president for the Student Government Association. I assure you that doesn't mean anything nearly as cool as you may think. I was perhaps the most gullible? Or perhaps most church-nerdy? ... No, I was definitely *not* the most church nerdy. ... Anyway, one thing it did mean was that I was the primary student tasked with advocating on behalf of the student body before the seminary administration. I got to sit in on the meetings with the Board of Trustees, and had some one-on-one conversations with the president of the seminary, Rev. Dr. David McAllister-Wilson. ... Can I call him David? ... I'm going to call him David.

I remember vividly one conversation I had with David. He said to me that one of the other theological seminaries in America had been offered something like a \$60million gift, but that the gift had one string attached: the giver wanted a building at the school named after them. The gift was contingent upon the school being willing to offer some form of public and lasting acknowledgement of the giver's name – specifically, the naming of an education building.

And the scripture reads, “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.”

The sermon should be able to end right there, right? ... Yet this \$60million gift is just the icing on the cake – or the tip of the iceberg that is the visible manifestation of the years of influence that has come from the corporate church herself. This practice of calling for attention, for public displays of personal piety, it is steeped in our tradition – just look at the names that adorn the windows of this sanctuary.

Now, before I continue, I want to offer pause, because this is – among the many questions we will be asking in the 40 days that lie ahead – a complicated and delicate question. It’s delicate because in some situations, the names on the plaques and windows are names to which we are connected. I mean, the plaque here under my hand is that of the Rev. H. P. Clarke, the pastor of the church in the 1940s. Rev. Clarke was the father of Virginia Backus, a saint of the church who just joined the heavenly host five years ago. There are memories and histories associated with the names that adorn the walls of most churches, if not found in the name of the church itself.

And this is complicated, because, and let’s just be honest, the church needs some good publicity. A few years ago when we started offering school bookbags to the students at Jefferson Houston, our Mission and Ministry team had a lengthy conversation about whether or not to include a bookmark that named these bookbags as having been gifted by the church. We felt in one way that it wasn’t a necessity – that it really didn’t matter if the recipients knew that the church had donated these backpacks. And yet, we also knew that including a bookmark was one of the easiest ways to be able to say that “there’s at least one church in the community that cares about your success in school.” For as much negative attention as the church gets – especially in relationship to children – a little good news isn’t bad, right?

As complicated and delicate as the subject is, our scriptural text doesn’t offer much latitude.

Verse two reads, “whenever you give alms (that is, when you give anything – money or food – to the poor), do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others.” It continues in verse 3, saying, “When you do give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret.” The text suggests not only should you not seek public notice or notoriety for your giving, but you shouldn’t even pat yourself on the back. It indicates that, if you’re giving to the poor for public reward, then you will have earned your reward, and the Lord will have no further reward to give you.

But the text doesn’t just limit the issue of recognition to the giving of alms; it extends these restrictions to prayer. “Whenever you pray,” verse 5 begins, “do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly, I tell you, they have received their reward.” Further, verse 6 continues, “Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret.” I think for most of us, this one is a bit easier to follow. Right? Not everyone loves speaking in public, and few of us volunteer to pray even in small group zoom calls. Though, as for the public witness of the church, perhaps someone should fill in Westboro Baptist on the prohibition of praying on street corners. Surely this prohibition extends to prayers of condemnation as much as it does prayers of supplication and thanksgiving?

Almsgiving and prayer, anything else Lord? ... What's that, yes?

Verse 16 picks up: "Whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward." ... Ok, so, don't make myself look miserable when I'm fasting. Got it.

Is that all?

Verse 19: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Prayer, almsgiving, fasting, storing up worldly treasures ... done for personal vanity and self-acclaim. Why, Church?

Did you catch the theme of Jesus' critique in these four areas of faithfulness? Jesus doesn't say we shouldn't pray. In fact, in verses 7-15, which we didn't read tonight, Jesus teaches us how to pray. And Jesus doesn't say we shouldn't give alms; in fact, Jesus says we should give to those who have need. Jesus goes so far as to say we can't just give the minimum, that we should even give the coat off our back; and he says to the rich young ruler, he should give it all away. And Jesus doesn't say we shouldn't fast; in truth, Jesus encourages the practice of fasting and demonstrates the practice of fasting in the wilderness for forty days. And while Jesus doesn't outright critique having great wealth, he certainly puts a lot of expectations on those who have great wealth. He says that wealth is one of the greatest obstacles to true faithfulness – and that it's harder for a wealthy individual to enter heaven than for a camel to go going through the eye of a needle.

But look back at the scripture – if Jesus isn't critiquing the practices in and of themselves, what is the challenge? It is not the practice, it is the recognition and reward. The phrase, "Truly I tell you, they have received their reward," is repeated word-for-word three times. Jesus' focus is that "true piety (true faithfulness) is not for show."<sup>i</sup>

Scholar Douglas Hare sums up this text this way; he writes, "True religion consists in acknowledging that God alone is God. True piety, therefore, comprises practices that give form and substance to this acknowledgement. Giving, prayer, and fasting, if undertaken for the praise it will win from others, is basically irreligious, and the practitioner who pretends to be seeking to glorify God but in fact is intent only on seeking self-glory is a hypocrite."<sup>ii</sup>

And yet, so much of what we do as the church is done in – at minimum – a veiled attempt at self-glory.

I was part of a call recently with some leaders at the conference level who are looking to create a new staff position – a worthy and necessary position – to help the conference with the ministries of racial equity, inclusion, and justice. When talking about the need for this position, one of the leaders indicated that such a position doesn't exist in any of our United Methodist Conferences. They talked about this position as one that might be a model around the concerns of racial equity that other

conferences might seek to emulate. Call it my cynicism, but it seems to me we need this position in Virginia not to show others what they could or should be doing, but because our Conference and Commonwealth run rampant with racial inequities. If we're creating a position simply to show others how great we are, and how good they could be, is it really for the good of God, or is it just a grasp at self-glory veiled in a pretty (and necessary) package?

And friends, this is why the comma exists. This is why Ash Wednesday exists. This is why we spend, not just one day, but an entire season offering pause and reflection. To really answer the question Why, Church?, we have to go deep. We have to dig around on the inside, deep in our hearts, and thorough in our minds, to identity and name – not just the actions that present themselves – but the motives behind the actions we take. We have to ask, and to keep asking, why do we do that which we do. Are we in this for some kind of personal acclaim and self-glory? Are we giving to the church, and to those in need in the community around us, simply so that we might be recognized for our philanthropic ventures?

We have to dig until we can answer honestly, and without reservation, the question, “For whom are we doing these things and what are we seeking to gain?”<sup>iii</sup> If the answer, as challenging as it might be to acknowledge, is anything other than “God, and God’s will,” we might as well just stop. In a world like we live in today, anything the church does – as a corporate body, or as the individuals who comprise the church – anything that is done for self-glory or corporate gain will diminish, restrict, and at times destroy the good that God is trying to do through us.

This is the hard and dirty work of Lent – it’s time to dig. It’s time to get your working jeans on and forget about your nail polish, because the digging can be hard, and it’s not usually clean. But man oh man, is it necessary.

Speaking of dirty, tonight is Ash Wednesday – a night on which we remember just how dirty the work of Lent is with the marking of the cross in ash. The ash serves as a reminder that this world, this work, this faith – it’s not about any one of us. Each of us, as gifted and loved by God as we are, we are here but for a time. Ultimately, to dust we will return. The ash serves as a reminder that this life, any love we can share with one another, it is not for our glory, but for the glory of the God who gives breath, who taught us to love, and who was, is, and shall be forever more.

As we prepare to receive the ashes, I invite you to hold on to this question that we might journey this season together: Why, Church? Why, Church? Why are we so self-obsessed? May God lead us in the work of digging deep that we might proclaim a greater faithfulness tomorrow. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Anna Case-Winters. *Matthew: Belief, A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.

<sup>ii</sup> Douglas R. A. Hare. *Matthew: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993.

<sup>iii</sup> Shively Smith. “Commentary on Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21.” <http://workingpreacher.org>. Retrieved February 28, 2022.