



REALLY?

**Untruths
Uncovered**

Many untrue things are said about God, Jesus, the Bible and the Church. Let's expose some false narratives as we walk toward Easter this year. We are not trying to win arguments, but to begin conversations with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15). Each week's sermon will provide a thoughtful question, so you can start a conversation with a skeptic or non-believer. Ultimately, Easter morning declares the greatest news. Everyone said Jesus was dead, and that death would hold Him forever. Really? Guess what—Jesus is alive again!

REALLY? • Hebrews 10:19-25 • Tim McConnell • March 11, 2018

I went to a congregation once. Mega-gathering. Tens of thousands of people. I was surprised how much you had to pay. Pay to park, pay for tickets to get in, pay a lot for the food—the ritual meal. Everyone was wearing the same color clothes. That weirded me out a little, but there was a strong sense of community. The greeters were nice and showed me where to sit. The main symbol in this congregation was the head of a horse, and when I walked into the main gathering to take my seat I knew why. There was a great statue of a white stallion we could all see no matter where we sat. In front of us, a small group of young men and women led us in chants. They were wearing the same colors too. I was surprised that I knew exactly how to respond. “De” – “Fence!” “Bron” – “Cos!” It was a moving experience. Expensive, but moving. Was that church?

What I like about this series is the time I get to spend imagining myself as a non-Christian. What would I be doing right now if I didn't love and follow Jesus Christ in my life? What does it look like to someone who doesn't know God, or just barely believes there is a God—what does it look like to them when I go to church? What do they think has motivated me? What do they think the draw is? Sometimes I see maps of business plans and development ideas for cities showing all the restaurants, parks, venues, hotels, commercial buildings and the churches are just empty spots on the map. People don't know what to do with churches. Here, First Pres is deeply involved in the development plans of the city, as we have been since our inception. Our Executive Director Alison Murray serves right now as chair of the Colorado Springs Downtown Partnership, so we show up on a map every now and then! But people just don't know what to do with churches. What are they good for? Couldn't they be replaced with something useful? Our facilities have more people flow through in the course of a week than most large buildings downtown. That's something. But I don't think you can get church until you get Christ. Increasingly, in the eyes of the world around us, church is an absolute waste—maybe doing more harm than good. Let me explain.

We have been seeking to understand the viewpoint of the skeptic, and I'm jumping out on a limb a little bit this week. This week I'm saying something that I think skeptics and non-Christians believe that they would never, ever say to you. I think many people believe church is actually bad for you. In the first sermon of this series I said you may have heard that

church is a sociological phenomenon reflecting the human need to gather up in like kind. Like fish swimming in a school in the ocean, for fear of predators and dangers, we find others like us and swim all together in a giant pod. Safety in numbers. Comfort in likeness. People need to be together to feel safe. So, in the minds of those who do not know God, church is an exercise in “community through conformity.” If I swim with the other fishes, look like the other fishes, act like the other fishes, I get to be protected by the school. But what is the main project of our contemporary world? Diversity and pluralism. What is the highest value? Rugged individualism and self-actualization. What do we want more than anything else? Autonomy and independence. A “community through conformity” exercise runs directly counter to all of these values. You're doing it wrong! You're going the wrong way! See? But is that all church is? Community through conformity? Let me tell you, if I thought that was all we were doing here, I'd be in another business. I would go do something else. It's not even the best way to do community through conformity. A Broncos game is much more effective, and a lot more profitable! But that's one way the world believes church is bad for you.

One more, though. Because this one really rattled me and frankly served as one of the reasons I felt the Lord calling us into this study. About a year ago, there was a suicide in the north area of Colorado Springs, and the student who took his own life had been attending a youth ministry outreach we all know and love here. An article appeared in the paper linking the two. The implication of the article was that talking to troubled teens about God and heaven could inspire them to escape by taking their own lives. I almost fell out of my chair, as a lot of us did when we read that article. But in a way I was grateful too. Finally, someone was saying what they really think of the Christian faith. Friends, that is where we are today. Many who lead and shape and represent our common lives together, our culture, many think the church is not just a feckless anachronism to harmlessly entertain the few who still need it, but that it is actually harmful. Church is bad for you. Really?

What is church all about? If you don't get Jesus you won't get church. But if you do get Jesus, you need His church. What is the church? The church on earth is the people of God who are in the world drawing near to Him to enjoy His presence, glorify His name and rehearse His Kingdom. Church isn't a building, it's a movement of people. Tear this building down and First Pres is still right here. Church is an exercise of praise—when God is glorified, lives are transformed.

Church is a demonstration of God's goodness to the world—when lives are transformed God is glorified. Church is bad for you if you are trying to stick to the patterns and practices of this present world order. Then church is bad for you, because it is going to change you. You are going to be altered at the altar, you are going to experience a transformation if you hang out here. Fair warning! This stuff changes your life. But I don't think church is bad for you, because the patterns we learn here connect us with Jesus.

"Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body." (Hebrews 10:19-20). If you don't get Jesus, you don't get church. You have to leave the horizontal plane and approach the vertical plane. Your friend asks you why you go to church, all they can see is the horizontal. You need community. You like the feelings it gives you. You enjoy feeling inspired to do better at home or at work or with good deeds. Your friend then evaluates what he or she sees of your practice of going to church on those terms—those are the only terms they have to examine! The horizontal. You have to go vertical at some point. "For me, it's really about Jesus. It's about a relationship with God. You think God is there don't you? Do you think you could interact with God? Have a relationship with God? Church is where I learn about and rehearse and practice my relationship with God. When Jesus died on the cross, He opened up a new door to God. The curtain, as symbol of separation from God, was torn open when Jesus died for my sins. My sins separated me from God, but in the body of Christ I am again united to God, because in Jesus, God's Son, my sins were atoned for and paid for and now in His body I am united to God." You know, without that, I don't know why anyone would do church.

"And since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water." (Hebrews 10:21-22). That's baptism. An outward sign of an inward grace. It's your heart that matters, your heart needs to be sprinkled, not just your head. But we have a great priest over the house of God. That's Jesus. What does a priest do? A priest presents God to the world and the world to God. Jesus presides over the house of God. So then, "let us draw near to God with a sincere heart." How do you do that? God's everywhere. But Jesus said, "For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them." (Matthew 18:20). Let us

gather to "draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings." I can't linger too long here, but this touches on the "assurance of faith." What is that? It's that feeling, that sensibility resting in our hearts that we are indeed saved, that we do indeed belong to Jesus, that I myself, very individually, feel assured very directly by the Holy Spirit that I am a child of God. Now, you can't lose your position in God's house. Once you have given your life to Jesus, He has authority to name you a son or daughter, and once named that cannot be removed, your inheritance cannot be taken from you by any force no matter what you do. But you can lose your assurance of faith. You can start to forget who you are. You can start to forget God. You can start to return to the patterns of the world and forget the patterns of the Kingdom of God and the household of God over which Jesus reigns as high priest. We don't want to do that!

So: "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching." (Hebrews 10:23-25) Why do you go to church? Why do you make it a priority to go through all the rigmarole to get here and sit here and give this hour away? If you don't get Jesus you won't get church. But if you belong to Jesus, you long to be in His presence, you long to be in His house, you long to be reminded of your assurance of faith through the ordinary means of grace—Word, Sacrament, Song, Prayer—you long to have your heart shaped and formed, reshaped and reformed, again and again after the patterns of the Kingdom of Heaven. You don't give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, because when you do, you feel it. You feel it in your soul. It's like holding your breath too long when you stay away. I don't just go to church to conform into a community. The community is nice, it's really nice in fact. But I go to church because I am united to God in Jesus Christ. God is glorified. Lives are transformed. To be honest, church is not something I do—it's something God is doing in me, in us, to the world, for His glory. And it's bad for you. It's really bad for you...if you want to stay far from God, separated from God, living out the patterns of this world alone. If that's what you want, church is bad for you. But if you are in Christ, this is life. At the core of the church is joy in union with Christ.

Oh, there's so much to say. I only hope this helped a little the next time you are in a conversation about your commitment to First Pres. There are shelves and shelves of books about the church and how good it is! One of them written by a guy you know. It feels like we

only started the discussion this morning. We easily get caught up in the horizontal dimensions of church. We want to defend our church. It's useful! It belongs on the city map! We do good stuff! But once we measure the utility of the church by the measures provided for us by the world, we've already lost. If you don't get Jesus you won't get the church. The church is the Body of Christ in the world.

We say the church needs to change the world. We separate out these two categories, church and world, and set them up opposed to one another. The world is lost, the world is broken, the world is unjust, the world is perverse, the world is violent. We the church need to go out there and fix that world! Why isn't the church going out there and fixing that world? Friends, we are the world. Don't you see? We are the world. We are broken. We are unjust. We are perverse and violent and lost. As Christ our High Priest gathers us, you and me, to be here in His house under His leadership, Christ is gathering the broken world to be healed. As we do not neglect to gather, to give God praise, to spur one another on to love and action, as we gather we are the world being redeemed. You bring your broken heart; you bring it here. Christ heals. Christ redeems. Christ transforms. The world is changed. Now quickly run and tell someone else, healing is found here in Jesus Christ. Here the world changes.

The church is called the Body of Christ. Hebrews says the curtain that once separated people from God has been replaced with the body of Christ, and it doesn't separate people from God, it unites people with God. From the moment Christ's body emerged from the grave people have tried to drag it back down into the tomb. I'm sure it's dead. I'm positive it's dead now. The church is dead this generation, no doubt. The Roman Empire opposes the church; it won't last a year. The body of Christ won't survive communism in Russia. The Chinese government is against the church; the body can't live there. The culture in Africa can't absorb Christianity, the body will die over there for sure. Europe will never see the Body of Christ alive again. Egypt and the Middle East, well, there's just no chance the body could live there. The Body of Christ just won't stay down, it just won't go back to the grave where the world thinks it belongs—it just won't die! Why? Jesus already did death. Death is done. From here on out, the body lives and walks and will carry on to accomplish its mission. And the gates of hell will not prevail against it. O family of God, don't neglect to gather, don't give up on meeting together as some have done. Draw near. Join to glorify the Lord. Jesus is changing this world right here, right now.

STUDY GUIDE

REALLY? • Hebrews 10:19-25

UP: Connect With God Through Spending Time in God's Word

Read our passage for the week, Hebrews 10:19-25. Allow a few moments to silently reflect on what you heard. Read it one more time. Pray for your study of God's Word.

- What do you notice about our passage? What questions do you have after reading the passage?
- In your own words, why do we have confidence to enter God's holy presence? Can you remember when you first grasped this confidence for yourself? How did it impact your approach to God?
- Re-read verses 21 and 22. What does it mean to draw near to God? How do we do that together as a church?
- How do we spur one another on to love and good deeds? Can you think of a time when someone enabled you to live this way?

Going Deeper:

What is a word, phrase or thought from today's passage that God seems to be lifting up as significant for you? How does it speak to a current situation in your life? How is God inviting you to respond?

OUT: Connect With the World Around Us by Joining God in God's Mission

Imagine you were to walk down Tejon Street and ask folks this question: What would the world be like without the church? What responses do you think you would get?

Who in your circle of influence could you ask the following question: What would the world be like without the church?

IN: Connect With the Family of God

Growing up, what was your view of the church? How has your attitude about church changed over the years?