

**Treasures of the Transformed Life # 3**  
**Jumping in with Both Feet (Presence)**  
 10 30 2011 Sam Jones Memorial UMC

**Scripture:**

**Present but not Voting**

**Jeremy Bentham** was an English attorney, philosopher, and social reformer who lived from 1748 to 1832. He inspired the foundation of University College London. In his will, the eccentric directed that his body be preserved and stored in a wooden cabinet. Bentham's embalmed body became a fixture in one of the school's hall. On special occasions, the Board of Trustees even wheeled the cabinet into their meetings. The minutes read: "*Jeremy Bentham: present but not voting!*"

This morning the majority of our 1,500 member church is neither present nor voting. Most congregations average one-third of their membership at worship on any given Sunday—UNLESS that Sunday falls on a holiday weekend . . . after Daylight Saving Time resumes . . . during the summer . . . on a rainy day . . . on a sunshiny day . . . well, you get the point.

Today we are continuing our fall worship series entitled *Treasures of the Transformed Life*. The book by Dr. John Ed Mathison is organized around our church membership vows. We promise to support the church with "*our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness.*" This morning we are focusing upon the importance of **presence**.

Why is presence so critical at church? We include it prominently in our membership vows. What is there about attending church that is so important? The questions can be answered in a variety of ways, but they are all different ways of stating two simple truths: **We need the church, AND the church needs us.**

**We Need the Church**

First of all, **we need the church**. In *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, the ritual for church membership declares:

*The church is of God, and will be preserved to the end of time, for the conduct of worship and the due administration of God's Word and Sacraments, the maintenance of Christian fellowship and discipline, the edification of believers, and the conversion of the world. All, of every age and station, stand in the need of the means of grace which it alone supplies.*

The church provides unique opportunities for Christian discipleship. Infants, youth, and adults are baptized into the faith. Young people are confirmed as members of Christ's church. Adults affirm and reaffirm their faith. Believers receive the bread and cup of the Lord's Supper. Couples are united in Holy Matrimony, saint's funerals observed, fellowship enjoyed, and God's people are prepared for service in the world.

Some object by saying: “I can worship on the golf course, in the woods, in the mountains, or at the beach.” Many folk enjoy weekly services at Lakeside Methodist or Bedside Baptist! I would not disagree with these sentiments, BUT I think it is a false argument. We are not faced with the choice of worshipping EITHER at these places OR at church. We are invited to worship BOTH in the world AND at church.

I would dare say, however, that we greatly improve our chances for God’s blessings when we are present at church. John Wesley included communal worship among God’s “**means of grace.**” These are reliable spiritual disciplines through which the Holy Spirit regularly and dependably blesses Christians.

John Wesley said, “*The Bible knows nothing of solitary religion.*” We need one another. Like the Psalmist, let us gather together with joyful hearts saying, “*I was glad when they said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord!*” (Psalm 122:1)

### **The Church Needs Us**

We need the church, and the corollary is that **the church needs us**. The Holy Spirit places a high value on each of our lives—each person here is vitally important to the life of the church.

Paul described the church as “*the body of Christ,*” and each Christian is a member of the larger body. The Lord has blessed you with unique gifts, abilities, and talents that no one else possesses. The absence of any part hurts the whole.

In *Treasures of the Transformed Life*, Dr. Mathison uses the example of a **jigsaw puzzle**. The overall reality is created by hundreds of interlocking parts. Each piece is unique. The puzzle cannot be completed without all of the pieces. Each piece links with the other pieces around it. One missing piece can make all the difference.

During the fall, it is common to see **geese** migrating south for the winter. We have all seen flocks of geese flying in a V formation. Do you know why they form a **V formation**? Because it is easier than a S formation!

Actually, it is a wonderful example of **teamwork**. The first goose leads the way, expending 100% of the energy necessary to fly through the air. Each successive goose exerts less energy because of the lift from the wings of the geese ahead of it. NASCAR fans will recognize the similarity of stock cars “drafting” behind one another.

Studies show that geese back in the formation only spend 70% of the energy the lead goose uses. When the leader gets tired, it peels off to one side and another takes its place. They make the journey together through teamwork.

The V formation also allows the geese to see each other and adjust to changes in the flight plan. Military pilots use a similar formation for the same reasons.

Finally, the geese honk to one another in encouragement. The geese further back in the formation let the lead goose know that they are there.

Only a silly goose tries to make the journey alone. Together we are so much more that we are alone. You contribute something that no one else can. Seeing one another at church is good for our souls both as individuals and a community of faith. If you decide to honk, let it be in encouragement rather than complaint or critique.

## **Church Attendance**

We have over 1,500 members in our congregation, and each one promised to support the church with their presence. Some folk attend weekly—and others weakly! In reality, we have a number of congregations divided not only by the three worship services but also by attendance patterns.

In part, this reflects a changing understanding of **regular worship attendance**. Back in the 1950s and 1960s, someone who attended church regularly would go every Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night. By the 1970s and 1980s, regular attendance only involved Sunday morning worship with an occasional visit to another service. Today many younger people think regular worship attendance means showing up at church once or twice a month. If asked, they would sincerely answer that they support the church with their presence.

This morning each person here made the decision to wake up, get dressed and come to church. This is one of the few places in life where you get that option. Our presence at school and work is mandatory; however, we voluntarily attend church.

**Church is a choice.** It is a decision and not a feeling. Here is a critical question to consider: when do you decide whether you and your family are going to attend church on any given Sunday? If the decision is not made until Sunday morning, then most likely you will not come.

Of course, this challenge is nothing new. Two thousand years ago the author of Hebrews addressed the same concern. He wrote: *“Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”* (Hebrews 10:25)

In his book, Dr. Mathison describes how Frazer Memorial United Methodist Church emphasized worship attendance. Each year during the stewardship emphasis people would commit to how many Sunday morning services they would attend during the coming year.

In Chapter 15, John Ed recalls a huge **ice storm** that hit Montgomery in the 1990s. Most churches in town cancelled services, but Frazer Memorial decided to have church for anyone who could attend. He arrived at the church about 6:30 on Sunday morning. One of the first people he saw was one of the congregation’s elderly members.

John Ed said, “Miss Lucille, I didn’t expect to see you here today. It’s so icy, and you have to have somebody to drive you, so I thought you’d decide not to come today.”

Miss Lucille replied, “John Ed, I didn’t decide this morning to come today. If I had waited until this morning to decide, I wouldn’t have come. It’s too col. But you see, I decided last November when I turned in my commitment card that I’d be here 48 Sundays. I know what four I’m going to be out of town, and this isn’t one of them. I decided last November that I’d be here this Sunday in February!”

Reflecting upon the encounter, Dr. Mathison writes:

*She already knew what so many people eventually find out: If you wait until Sunday morning to decide whether or not you’ll go to church, you’ll most likely never get there. It’ll probably be pretty easy to find an excuse not to go. If you make a commitment that you’re part of the family and you’re not going to miss an*

*opportunity to take part in whatever happens, however, you'll end up with a much better record. You—and your church—will be all the better for it. (111-112)*

Here's a simple truth that we all know. We make time to do the things that we want to do.

The other piece is **you never know what you might miss**. Jesus promised that when two or more gather in his name, then God's Spirit is present. Is that something that you really want to miss?

I'm involved in a three year continuing education program with a group of Methodist clergy that is underwritten by a grant from the Lilly Foundation. Last month we spent a week with a nationally renowned story teller. We just happened to meet right outside of Yellowstone National Park!

On our final full day, the group planned a trip south of Yellowstone. I woke up that morning with a terrible headache and came within a thought of staying at the house. However, I had committed to participate fully in the entire experience, so I got up and went. If I hadn't, I would have never seen the **Grand Tetons**.

How many times do we miss God's blessings simply because we do not go? Sometimes just showing up is important.

### **Church Presence**

Church attendance is critical to our spiritual growth. However, there's a **difference between attendance and presence**. We can physically attend worship and still not be fully present.

There's no telling how many great Sunday School lessons, inspired choir anthems, powerful hymns, and moving sermons I have missed while sitting in church. I've sat where you are sitting, and I know all the ploys. I have daydreamed, doodled on bulletins, made grocery lists, counted organ pipes, flipped through hymnals, stared into space, and wondered if we were really going to sing all six stanzas of *Just as I Am!*

One weekend a little boy went to church with his grandparents. His grandmother sang in the choir, so she paid the child a dollar to keep his grandfather awake during the service. She was astonished to see her husband nod off during the sermon with her grandson doing nothing about it. When asked after the service, the boy replied, "Granddaddy gave me two dollars to let him sleep!"

I have a responsibility as your pastor to design a meaningful worship service and to preach a well crafted sermon. However, communication requires two parties. Now, God CAN break through our apathy and inattentiveness to do the miraculous. But MOST of the time we will find what we look for in worship.

If you enter the sanctuary ready to leave . . . if you don't pick up a hymnal during the songs . . . if you drift off during the Scripture . . . if you pick out the false notes in the choir anthem . . . if you daydream during the sermon . . . if you multitask during church,

then odds are good that worship will be boring. You can say you attended but you were not present.

If you enter God's house with expectation and anticipation . . . if you sing the hymns "*lustfully*" as Wesley's instructs . . . if you pay close attention to God's Word . . . if you listen to the words of the choir anthem . . . if you listen diligently to the sermon . . . if you focus on what's happening during church, then odds are good that worship will be transforming. You not only attended but also were present.

During a United Methodist Men's breakfast last year, we were enjoying roundtable discussion about a variety of questions. One of the questions centered around focus. Now, ladies, you KNOW that men are natural-born multitaskers. We can watch TV, read a book, and have a conversation all at the same time—and we do so often!

However, the men at my table were talking about the importance of being truly present in the moment. What we need is less multitasking and more focus on the task at hand. One man shared this wise saying, "Be where your feet are."

**Be where your feet are.** This has become a new mantra for my life.

### **Showing Up to Play**

Sometimes just showing up to play is important.

Wally Pipp joined the New York Yankees in 1915. The first baseman played eleven years in New York, helping his team win three straight championships. In addition to solid defensive play, Pipp batted over .300 in three seasons.

Midway through the 1925 season, Pipp took a day off due to a bad headache. A beanball in practice prolonged his absence from the lineup. A young and unknown kid named **Lou Gehrig** took his place. Pipp never started for the Yankees again.

Lou Gehrig became the "*Iron Horse*" of Major League Baseball, playing 2,130 consecutive games. He boasted a career batting average of .340 with 493 homeruns. "Columbia Lou" played in thirty-four World Series' games where he batted over .360. He still holds the Major League, lifetime record of twenty-three grand slams.

In 1939, however, Gehrig's health deteriorated to the point where he took himself out of the lineup. Doctors diagnosed him with a rare disease named amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. Today ALS is better known as "Lou Gehrig's Disease."

On July 4, 1939, Yankee Stadium hosted "Lou Gehrig Day." In one of the most memorable moments in baseball history, Gehrig said to the packed stands: "Today, I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth." Later that year he was admitted to the newly opened Hall of Fame.

Lou Gehrig is still remembered for his athletic prowess and heroic example. He ranks among the greatest athletes to ever play the game of baseball. Gehrig's tenacity, courage, stamina, and determination bear witness to his inner character. He both lived and died with distinction and dignity.

With all due respect to Gehrig's many other accomplishments, I am the most impressed with his record of consecutive games played. He often played in pain. During his consecutive game streak, he suffered from a fractured thumb, broken toe, back spasms, and chronic lumbago. Yet he seemed invincible, stoically starting each game despite his injuries.

Lou Gehrig reminds us that sometimes just showing up is important--especially in those moments when we really don't feel like it. Treating your spouse with love even when you don't feel especially loving or lovable. Caring for your children at times when the responsibility seems overwhelming. Being a friend although the price is much costlier than first estimated. Attending church even when it feels irrelevant. Praying at times when no one seems to be listening.

A strange thing happens to people who "just" show up: good things happen. Marriages endure difficulties, childcare develops selflessness, friendship engenders love, church becomes inspiring, and God answers prayers.

Some people set records, gain acclaim, and shine brightly. Others work quietly outside the limelight. All of us are called to do our best. However, sometimes just showing up to play is the most important part of all.

*"I will support the church with . . . my presence."*