

Smoky Mountain Reflections #165

“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.” What does this mean? “We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.” We should all be familiar with these words, whether we memorized them in our youth or learned them as an adult. However, we often have a skewed view of how to apply this commandment. I was at an elders meeting in one of my previous congregations when I learned that sadly, only about 35% of our members were in worship on any given Sunday. I was further saddened to find out that for a congregation of that size, this was an average percentage. “Regular attendance” is a term that is defined clearly in scripture as weekly, but many Christians define it as every other week, or monthly, or quarterly, or occasionally, and some who attend only for Christmas and Easter would even call themselves regular in their attendance.

When I was a Vicar, Pastor Dettmer and I were having a conversation about attendance and I mentioned to him that it seemed to me that some folks were just looking for any good excuse to avoid church. His response was, “No, they will take the first excuse that comes along”. The evil one is trying to take God’s gifts away from you and two of those gifts are His Word and Sacrament, because that is where you are fed spiritually. If he can tempt you while you are spiritually starving, his odds of success increase. So he provides a long list of excuses and distractions to get in the way of your regular weekly attendance in God's house to receive God’s gifts.

When I was in that meeting I mentioned earlier, one of the elders mentioned that it was unrealistic to expect 100% attendance because of all the legitimate things that cause people to miss worship. This may be a true statement, but it should still be our personal goal to attend worship weekly. However, let’s look at some of those things that make us miss church.

I think one of the first on the list would be travel; many of us use the weekends to get to and from faraway places, and while being on vacation in Hawaii is a good reason to miss church in Tennessee, it is not a good reason to miss worship altogether. God has good churches all over the world; one should put as much time and effort into looking for a place to worship on vacation as one would into finding a good restaurant.

The list of “reasons” (excuses) we do not attend is long: boredom, tiredness, laziness. So while Jesus bleed and died on a cross we can’t be bothered to miss our only weekly opportunity to sleep in. Some avoid church because they are angry with someone and do not want to run into them, which is really difficult if that someone is the pastor. Sometimes we are just mad at God for some pain and suffering in our life and blame Him instead of trusting, learning, growing and attending. And let’s not forget those all-important sporting events. It's much more fun to attend a softball tournament than to listen to my pastor tell me that I am a sinner. And if in your mind a sporting scholarship is the only way you think you can afford college, then working for your future then becomes more important than what some would call just singing a few hymns of Sunday. Or maybe you have a hobby or project that just needs a few more hours to be finished. Or maybe you are participating in or helping to coordinate the Santa Run. And don’t forget all those all important political news shows that only air on... you guessed it, Sunday morning.

So what is a church supposed to do with all that competition on Sunday mornings? Well first, some of these things are out of the control of some of the people who are absent. Some have to work or have other real obligations that make church attendance nearly impossible for them. To help with this we have a Wednesday service year-round to provide an additional worship opportunity.

But we must also admit that we make time for things that are important to us, so please pray that with God's help, weekly worship could be and remain a high priority in your schedule. Good habits are hard to start, but once begun, progressively easier to maintain. Our attendance here at St. Paul is actually a little above the average for a congregation our size, floating usually between 65-70%, though these numbers are a little bit padded by the fact that we get a lot of vacationing Lutherans. So while we can agree that a 100% attendance goal is a pipe dream, we can also do our best with God’s help to make missing out on God’s gifts a less regular part of our lives.

In Christ,
Pastor Portier