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Pentecost 3 – Psalm 100 – Why Do YOU Come to Church?

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We've all seen the red flags waving and heard the warning sirens blaring about church attendance dropping through the generations here in America. That's a well-known and well-attested fact in studies and church reports at this point, and yet still, nobody quite knows how to put a finger on the root cause. Maybe it has to do with youth sports, maybe COVID, maybe just changing values in society, who can say for sure. But I have a sneaking suspicion that a big part of our problem is that we pastors and also we parents haven't done a good job teaching *why* public worship is so good and important and needful. Even if we've made it clear to our children that they should be going to church – and that's true! – that can come off like *you better just do it or else*. But if we haven't shared that clear, Gospel-centered, Jesus-focused *why*, then we shouldn't be surprised when that truth doesn't take root. So why do YOU come to church? Psalm 100 here is going to teach us that it's not because we have to, not because we're supposed to, not because we just should. It's because public worship here in God's house is as vital and joyful for our souls as eating and drinking and breathing; it's because we're *blessed* to, we're *privileged* to – it's not because we *have* to, it's because we *get* to.

Now that might seem like just a bunch of word salad, but really that difference in perspective is the difference between negative and positive, and between the Law and the Gospel. See, if you just think about coming to church as something that you *have* to do, then that turns it into a chore. That makes it all about your own work and effort. After all, here in these five verses of Psalm 100, there are no less than six imperative verbs, six commands *telling* us to worship God!

But if you think coming to church means just doing what you're told, that's a reasoning that touches your head and your sense of obligation rather than your heart and your sense of love and appreciation like God really wants. And in fact, there's nobody who loves for us to look at church that way more than the devil, because he wants more than anything to keep us from seeing the real blessings of being here in God's house. See, if he can get us to think that all church is about is just keeping your name on a roster, or just dropping your "dues" in the offering plate every once in awhile, or a place you only go to when you feel guilty enough or when you don't have anything more fun or enjoyable to do instead – then it's no surprise why lots of people don't bother with it. Nobody likes hypocrisy, and those attitudes are just dripping with it. See, this sinful nature we all have is naturally selfish, and whether it's just that we don't like being told what to do or that we just don't want to prioritize the time and

commitment in this consumer culture we live in, those kinds of ideas about coming to church make it very obvious why more and more people all the time are drifting away.

No, let's not think of church as an obligation or a chore – who wants to be a part of that? Let's not think of church only as a place to put some money in so you can get something good back out, like God is really nothing more than our personal vending machine. Let's not think of church like any other club or activity you can take part in or not at your own leisure, as if God didn't clearly spell out its absolute necessity in the lives of believers when he said in the 3rd Commandment, "Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy." How could we be so careless, loveless, thankless to think those things about the God of our salvation? And on the other hand, let's also not think of church like a popularity contest or a beauty pageant or a feather-in-your-cap kind of comparison game either, as if being here more or doing more than the next guy makes you inherently better. Nothing spoils faster than self-righteousness, and that's really what all these different law-focused, *me*-focused attitudes about church come down to. We have to do this because *we. have to*. Not only is that attitude negative and upside down, it's dangerous for our souls because it can separate you from Christ and the real, life-giving purpose he has for you in public worship here at his house.

So let's look again at Psalm 100 and let's see the positive attitude of faith and love that our God wants us to have about worship. So why do *you* come to church? Verse 1 says, "*Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth.*" Think about *all* the things *all* the people in *all* the earth are doing right now. You could be anywhere else doing anything else, and that's how lots of people look at coming to church – like it's only something worth doing as long as you don't have something better to do. But is there actually anything better than this – better for your personal peace and perspective on life, better for your souls, better for your eternities? What a beautiful testimony it is for all the earth to see that this is the best and most beneficial thing for you to be doing right now! Yes, this is a place to shout for joy, because here God gives us blessings that are greater than anything we can find anywhere else.

And that's what verse 2 reminds us of: "*Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs.*" Literally that word *worship* here should actually be translated, *serve* the LORD. But you know, this isn't the kind of obligatory service where we're just being bossed around. *We get* to serve God with *gladness* and *joyful songs* here – this is a good thing! – because here God always serves us first. That's what's so great about coming to church. Lutherans have historically called their worship gatherings the Divine Service, because the first and best thing that happens here is that God serves us with his Word and Sacraments and brings us blessings like forgiveness for sin and new life and eternal salvation in heaven. And then, after God gives us those great gifts, we get to serve God in grateful response with our

prayer and praise and thanksgiving. So be glad, be joyful, sing out when you come here, friends, because you're not just here to serve God; first and foremost, he's here to serve you!

And verse 3 tells us that no one gives better service: "*Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.*" *The LORD is God* – that's a plain and simple reminder for us that the LORD is the only true God, and so he's deserving of all our worship and honor and praise. But what's more, he is the L-O-R-D, the God of Law and Gospel, who is absolutely faithful to all his promises to us, who sent his Son in free and faithful grace to save us for himself. Not only did he make us physically in the first place, as awe-inspiring as that is; he re-made us spiritually, he redeemed us to be his own faithful people. That means he forgives our sins and fixes our attitudes. All that guilt and obligation that our sinful nature can treat worship with; all those bad, selfish, sinful attitudes we talked about before that threaten our hearts and our relationship with God – Jesus cleansed us from them when he shed his blood for us on the cross, and now everything he did for us makes our hearts and attitudes right again. That's the promise and the power he delivers to you in the Confession & Absolution at the beginning of the service and again in Holy Communion at the end of the service. We are God's people now, we are his family now, we are the sheep of the Good Shepherd now, so nothing could be more fitting and more fulfilling for us than being right here for him to feed our faith, care for our souls, and guide our lives. Jesus made us his sheep and he wants to keep us in his flock until eternity, and the way he sees to that is through his Word and Sacraments that we get in blessed measure right here in God's house.

And that's a point that verse 4 makes even a little more strongly: "*Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name.*" These gates would normally enclose a city and these courts would normally surround a mansion or a palace, so to be inside of them means that you *belong*. This is *your own* home and *your own* family, and your God made it that way when he put his name on you in holy baptism. What a rich picture that is about what's happening when we come here for worship! When we come to church, it's like we're getting a little glimpse of the New Jerusalem in eternity; it's like we're visiting our Father's heavenly mansions, our King's palace in Paradise where we take our seats as his princes and princesses! What a thankful honor this is, what a praiseworthy privilege that we get to be here where Christ has promised to be present with us on earth, with his further promise that one day, by faith, we will get to be present with him in heaven.

And for that great gift, what more is there to say than verse 5 does: "*For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.*" *The LORD is good* – who could ever be as good as he has been to us? Who could give us such impossibly precious presents – this forgiveness, new life, and eternal salvation that are right

here for the taking? *His love endures forever* – what else is that really true about in life? Your sports career? Your hunting & fishing stories? Anything else money can buy? No, all those things pass away, but the most valuable thing we could ever have comes to us right here in God's Word and Sacraments, free of charge – life and love forever from the LORD our Savior. *His faithfulness continues through all generations* – and on this Father's Day weekend, this part is just for you dads. God is faithful to you from generation to generation, no matter how we might sometimes wander or balk or fail. He is the perfect Father who always welcomes us back home with open arms, and now he calls you, fathers, to be the men that your family needs. The job of a father is lots of things, but none of them are more essential than being the spiritual leader of your family. What is important to you will be important to your children – that's just how this fatherhood thing works! – so you can teach your children to be good at sports, to be good in school, to be handy with a wrench, but if you haven't genuinely, intentionally taught your children a love for Christ, for his Word, and for his house, you haven't done the job God has called you to do. There is nothing more important for fathers than seeing your children in heaven someday, and there is nowhere better to ensure that than being right here in your Heavenly Father's house every week. After all, his faithfulness continues *through* all generations – that means that even into eternity when the generations here on earth are over and done with, he will still be there and he wants you and your children to be there with him, so let's instill that faithful love deeply and let's enjoy it fully right here together!

Jesus said in our Gospel lesson for today, "*Freely you have received; freely give.*" We come to church not out of forced obligation as a chore, but out of thankful love for the privilege of God's free grace. Not because you need to do so much for God, but because God has already done so much for you. See, when you love someone, you find real, meaningful ways to show them and to spend time together with them – that's true this weekend with our earthly fathers, and it's true every weekend with our heavenly Father. There is nothing God loves more than to see his children here at his house, because here he gives us his Word and Sacraments, and with them, his Gospel gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation that promise we will be with him forever in our heavenly home. So let's pack these pews, let's lift up our hearts together, let's give our Savior-God all the glory he deserves, because there is nothing more natural, more central, more vital to our lives and eternities as God's people. So why do *YOU* come to church? Let's take a cue from Psalm 100: worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs – not because you *have* to, but because you *get* to. Amen.