

I thought it would be appropriate on this first Sunday in our new church building that we consider the question of why we need a church building in the first place. The answer to that question is obvious. A church building is a place for us to gather as a congregation. That is pretty straight forward. But the idea of the church gathering is actually very significant in the Bible and so I thought that it would be a way for us to celebrate our new church building by hearing from the Word of God something of the significance of the very basic purpose of a church building – it is a place for us to come together – a place for us to assemble as a congregation.

I read Psalm 84 as our Scripture reading. That is not the text for this sermon. We're going to be looking at a number of different texts from the Bible. But we'll start with Psalm 84. Psalm 84 is about the love of the OT people of God for the OT temple. In OT times God dwelt in the temple in a special way. God was present in the temple in a way that he was not present in other places. There is a sense in which God is present everywhere in the whole universe, but it is clear from Psalm 84 and many other places that God was present at the temple in a special way. The Psalm calls the temple God's dwelling place. And it was the place where God met with his people. And because of that it was a very special place for them. And that is reflected in the words of this Psalm. "How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God." The people of God loved the temple because that is where they went to worship God. Verse 10 says, "For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere."

Now church buildings today are not temples. No doubt you have heard it said that church buildings are not really churches. The church is the people of God, not the building. In the NT the **people of God** are the temple of God. Ephesians 2:19-22 refers to believers in Jesus as "a holy temple in the Lord" and "a dwelling place for God by the Spirit." So the language of God's dwelling place is transferred from the physical temple in the OT period to the people of God in the NT period. That means that no church building today has the same significance that the OT temple had. And yet it is hard not to make some kind of connection between the building and what happens here. It is more of an emotional connection than a theological connection. The fact is that the church building is used as a gathering place and the gathering is the place where God is present and the place simply facilitates that.

But it is hard not to have the emotional connection to the place where we gather and in gathering enter the presence of God. And so we can read Psalm 84 and think about our worship services which will be happening in this building. The dwelling place of God is the gathering of his people and the building facilitates the gathering and some of the associations with worship will rub off on the building. And that's ok as long as we don't start thinking that God is present in the building in any special way when we are not in it.

It is the gathering that is important and that is what I want us to dwell on in the rest of this sermon. The word "church" means assembly. The Greek word for "church" in the NT is *ekklesia* which means assembly. And that corresponds to the Hebrew word *qahal* which also means assembly. The NT was written in Greek and the OT

was mostly written in Hebrew and in both cases the word “assembly” is used as a name for the people of God. So the word church means assembly.

And that is very important because it means that one of the essential characteristics of the church is that it gathers. The church is not always gathered – obviously. The OT people of God were not always gathered. But in both cases it belonged to the essence of what it meant to be the people of God that they were a people who regularly gathered. And that means that one of the defining characteristics of the church of Jesus Christ is that it gathers.

This idea is rooted in the OT and particularly in the assembly of the people of Israel before the Lord at mount Sinai after he had delivered them from the slavery in Egypt. The deliverance of the people of Israel from their bondage in Egypt results in the people being gathered together before the Lord. Moses speaks of this great meeting at which God met with his people and gave them the Ten Commandments as “the day of the assembly” in Deuteronomy 9:10. In many of the pivotal moments in their history God gathered his people together to reaffirm his covenant with them. In Joshua 8:35 we read “There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel.” Nehemiah 8:2, “So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly....” And Psalm 149:1 “Praise the LORD! Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise in the assembly of the godly.”

The NT continues this idea for the people of God by using the word *ekklesia* to refer to the NT people of God and it describes them fulfilling their name in many references to them coming together. Let me give you just a few quick references. In 1 Corinthians 11:18 Paul says to the Corinthians, “when you come together as a church....” In 1 Corinthians 14:26 he says, “When you come together.... Let all things be done for building up.”

What this all means is that there is something very profound about the gathering of the church. In gathering we experience that we are a community, a people, a body in the most profound way. Everett Ferguson, a theologian who has written a very helpful book called, *The Church of Christ* writes, “To be a church, it must meet.... The church must manifest that it is a body by being together.... In assembly, the church becomes itself. It becomes conscious of itself, confesses itself to be a distinctive entity, shows itself to be what it is – a community (a people) gathered by the grace of God, dependent upon him, and honoring him. The assembly allows the church to emerge in its true nature: a redeemed community.... The church is a people, and a people must manifest itself as such by assembling.” (p.235)

So the fact that the church gathers together belongs to the definition of what a church is. The church is more than this. There are other ways of thinking about the church. The church is still the church when everyone goes home. The time when the church is not gathered, is also important because much of our witness and service happens in our families and in our neighborhoods and in our work and through para-church organizations. So to stress the great significance of gathering is not to say that it is the only thing that matters.

But it is say that it is an essential thing so that, a network of people who considered themselves Christians but who never met could never be a church in the biblical sense.

Now why does this matter? Clearly the gatherings of the church are important, but we need to consider why they are so important. And the first reason is that God is present in a special way in the gatherings of his people. The gathering of the church is a meeting between God and his people.

We see this in the idea of the people of God as an assembly in the OT. The great gathering of the people at Mount Sinai after they had been delivered from Egypt was a meeting between God and his people. The people appeared before God. Psalm 84 which we read as our Scripture reading uses the language of the people appearing before God in the worship of the temple. It describes the people on pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship at the temple and verse 7 says, "They go from strength to strength; each one appears before God in Zion."

In the NT there is the well-known saying of Jesus in Matthew 18:20, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them." This is an important passage for church discipline, but the principle applies to whenever the church gathers together in the name of Jesus. Jesus is among them. 1 Corinthians 14:25 is also an important verse for this point. This verse is part of a passage in which Paul is urging the people of Corinthian to prioritize prophecy over speaking in tongues. This was before the completion of the Bible when there was still prophecy and tongue-speaking in the church. And Paul is saying that if an unbeliever comes to the church meeting and he hears a message from God that he can understand he will fall on his face, worship God and "declare that God is really among you." There are a lot of issues related to understanding and applying this passage for today, but I'm just mentioning it because it clearly affirms that God is among his people when they gather before him.

This is a tremendous way to think about our church meetings. We are meeting with God. We are the people of God gathered before the Lord. The Lord is with us in a way that is more intense than he is with us when we are not gathered. That is an awesome thing to think about. We sing of this: "God himself is with us; let us now adore him and with awe appear before him." There is something very precious about that. And Psalm 84 reflects what a wonderful thing it is to meet with God. Verse 2, "My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the LORD." Verse 4, "Blessed are those who dwell in your house, ever singing your praise!"

Psalm 42 also reflects how delightful it is to meet with God in this way by expressing the longing of the Psalmist when he is kept from meeting together with God's people in the presence of God. Verse 2, "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?"

It gets even better.

There is a passage in the letter to the Hebrews that teaches us that when we gather here in the presence of God, there is a sense in which we join the gathering before God in heaven. Listen as I read Hebrews 12:22-24,

“But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.”

When we come together as the people of God for worship, we have come into the presence of God in heaven. This passage is saying that when the church gathers for worship they have come “to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect....”

Edmund Clowney has written on this, “God’s people no longer gather in Jerusalem. Rather, they now worship in the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb. 12:22). The earthly city was a shadow of the heavenly reality.... Boldly we may approach heaven’s assembly, boldly join the myriads of angels and the hosts of the redeemed. Boldly we may approach God himself, the Judge of all, for Jesus, our great High Priest, has opened the way. In the feast-day assembly of heaven, we come to Jesus, and to his sprinkled blood, the blood of the New Covenant.” (The Church, p. 31)

Now this is hard to comprehend and to visualize. But that is not uncommon in the Bible because the Bible deals with things that go beyond our sense experience – it deals with spiritual realities which we accept by faith and we understand something without understanding everything. Here on the basis of God’s word we understand that when we are gathered here on earth in the presence of God, we are taking part of the worship in heaven. This is not something that we see with our physical eyes, but it is something that we know to be true in a spiritual way through faith in the Word of God.

So our gatherings are really very significant. They are part of what it means to be the church of Christ, in them we meet with God, we enter his presence in a more intense way and we enter into the worship of heaven. These are amazing truths. From the perspective of the world our gatherings are nothing more than social and religious gatherings, but from the perspective of the Bible something very profound and awesome is happening that can only be known by faith.

And today we celebrate God’s provision for us of a place to gather. God has provided a variety of gathering places throughout the life of this congregation, but now finally we have our own church building. I hope that our joy and thanksgiving will be deepened to consider something of what a glorious thing it is when the church comes together to worship the Lord. Even though the building itself is not God’s house, it facilitates our coming together and when we come together God is in our midst and we are meeting with him.

Now I want to say a little more about the nature of worship. When we come together God meets with us, but what happens then? We have a conversation with God. God speaks to us and we speak to God. This is about our relationship with God. God is a personal God. He created us so that we could relate to him and we relate

to him and he to us through speaking. Relationships are about being together and speaking to one another. And that is what is going on in worship. Worship is a dialog between God and his people.

God speaks to us when we gather before him in worship. Many of the passages that we looked at in connection with the idea of God's people as an assembly in the OT describe God speaking to them in those gatherings – either directly like when God gave the Ten Commandments, but more often through the leaders of the people reading and applying the word of God. Nehemiah 8 is a good example of this where Ezra the priest gathered the people together and read them the Book of the Law of Moses. And in that meeting other leaders took part and helped the people understand. Nehemiah 8:8, "They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading." This theme continues in the NT with the importance of preaching. Paul teaches in 1 Timothy 5:17 that there are to be elders in the church who "labor in preaching and teaching." And he tells Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:2 to "preach the word."

So God speaks in the worship services through his word being read and proclaimed. And we speak to God through our prayers and through our singing. Both testaments make it clear that praying and singing are important parts of the worship of God.

Worship is a dialogue between God and his people. God speaks to us of his love and grace and requirements and we respond in praise and thanksgiving and faith and prayers. This is so important because it highlights the idea of fellowship with God. We spend time with God. And we listen to him speak to us through his Word and we respond in expressions of worship and love and praise and petition. This is about a living relationship between God and his people. It is the reason that God made us as personal beings capable of communicating and relationships. And that is very helpful when we are thinking about our meetings together with God. Worship is about personally interacting with the living God who is our God and who has chosen us for salvation in Christ for relationship.

So we've thought about the significance of our gatherings and how God is present with us in a special way and how worship takes place in a dialog with God.

The NT also speaks of our gatherings as occasion for our spiritual growth. One of the purposes of our gatherings is worshipping God, but it is clearly God's intention that our faith will be strengthened and our growth in holiness nurtured. 1 Corinthians 14 is an important passage here. It is a challenging passage because there is so much in it about speaking in tongues and prophesying, but it does teach us a lot about the purpose of our gathering together as a church. Paul's main point in the passage is that prophecy is much more useful in the church than tongue speaking because it can easily be understood. If people speak in tongues it needs to be interpreted so that others can profit from it. Now we do not believe that the NT teaches that tongue speaking or prophecy were to be permanent features of church life. We believe that once the Bible was complete, they were no longer needed and stopped. But this passage does show that one of the great purposes of church meetings is building us up in our faith and Christian walk.

It uses the terms “upbuilding and encouragement and consolation” in verse 3. It speaks of building up the church in verse 4. And it uses similar language throughout. In verse 26 he says, “Let all things be done for building up.”

So that is an important reason for our gatherings as a church. They are to serve to build us up in our faith and walk. So teaching, encouragement, correction, comfort. Hebrews 10:24-25, also speaks of this, “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”

Now this verse can apply to different kinds of meetings. It is addressed to the whole congregation. We are all to consider how to stir up one another to love and good works. We are all to encourage one another. That happens in our worship services, but also in bible studies and informal interactions with one another. A huge part of the reason that we gather together is to help each other to grow as Christians.

And this passage is urging not to neglect to meet together. It is urging us to do so all the more as we see the Day drawing near. The assumption here is that meeting together as Christians is really, really important for our spiritual growth and wellbeing. We have responsibilities to one another and we need to be stirred up and encouraged by others.

As this whole sermon has made clear, the Christian life is profoundly corporate. There is an individual aspect in that we remain individuals and we each have a relationship with the Lord. But it is not individualistic. Those who are saved are saved into the church. And a huge part of the Christian life happens in gatherings with other Christians. We cannot grow in isolation from other Christians. We need to be together. A lot. And we are not to neglect that.

These meetings do not all have to happen in this church building. Hospitality is important part of the picture. Small group meetings in homes may still be part of the picture. But we have this church building now and its purpose is to give us a place to gather – to meet – to worship together and to grow together by teaching, by encouragement, by example, by praying together, by serving together.

We have more capacity now so that more of us can meet at one time for our worship services as we continue to deal with this pandemic. We are starting mid-week gatherings for prayer and praise and instruction. Let us use our building for its purpose. We are in the middle of a pandemic. There are many different opinions about how we should live our lives in the light of the guidelines, the rules, the restrictions. The session believes that we should obey our civil leaders. We have sought to organize things so that as many as possible will come to our worship services and mid-week services. We all long for the pandemic to be over. But in the meantime we need to follow this verse as best we can in the circumstances. There may be some who would love to come but who because of age or other health problems feel that they should not come yet. Here too there is liberty of conscience. But there may be others who are staying away too easily. There may be some who are

neglecting to meet together. I ask that you examine your hearts in the light of this verse. Let us not neglect to meet together.

The profound significance of gathering is rooted in the fact that God saves a people. Our Saviour was given the name Jesus because he came to save his people from their sins. Jesus gave his life for his people. We “are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.” (Romans 12:5). We are a flock and Jesus is our Shepherd who gave his life for us. We are the “church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” Jesus Christ saved us from our sins to belong to his church. And the church gathers because we must be together to be the church.

God has given us this beautiful church building. It is a place for us to gather. Let us rejoice in God’s provision. But let us rejoice even more in the great significance of gathering for the people of God. Let us reflect the love of the Psalmist of Psalm 84, “How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God.... For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.”