

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Come Together: Some Assembly Required”

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Psalm 122

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We continue in this series “Come Together,” a focus on Scripture’s call and the Christian faith’s call into community. I’m looking forward to next Sunday, when we’ll hear from some of our youth reflecting on this same topic. Last week we looked at some of the temptations and pitfalls of isolation, that which confines us, pulls us away from the call to community, sometimes in the guise of self-reliance or independence. And this week we look at how the call to faith is inseparable from a call to assemble, and whether that’s a call we truly listen to. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

*I rejoiced with those who said to me,
“Let us go to the house of the LORD.”
Our feet are standing
in your gates, Jerusalem.
Jerusalem is built like a city
that is closely compacted together.
That is where the tribes go up—
the tribes of the LORD—
to praise the name of the LORD
according to the statute given to Israel.
There stand the thrones for judgment,
the thrones of the house of David.
Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
“May those who love you be secure.
May there be peace within your walls
and security within your citadels.”
For the sake of my family and friends,
I will say, “Peace be within you.”
For the sake of the house of the LORD our God,
I will seek your prosperity.*

Psalm 122

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Something I love that has happened here in the last year has been the repair/replacement of the church bells. At some point within the last few years, and I don’t really know when, it was

that way before I got here, something broke and the bells fell silent. But due to some generosity within the church, the system was replaced. (And spoiler alert, there aren't real bells up there. It's a speaker system. If that's pulling back the curtain a bit too much, don't worry. It's not like we put a boombox and an iPod up there. It's a professional system meant for this very purpose.)

When they play, they'll do the tune of a familiar hymn. I've been tempted to cue up some other songs too, but that might get me into trouble. (Can you imagine the Game of Thrones theme song playing over the church bells? This is what I think about during the week.)

But if you're here during the week, you'll hear the bells ring out at 9:00am, noon, and 5:00pm. If you're here on Sunday morning, they'll ring out a few minutes before each worship service starts. We thought about scheduling them right at 9:45am and right at noon, that is, at the end of each hour-long worship service, but then we realized that would serve as an official verdict whether the sermon went too long that day, so best avoided. I know some are thinking, "That was a missed opportunity."

Anyway, if you've heard them, especially during the week, I hope you've found them as reassuring as I have, ringing the sound of an old hymn through the air of the neighborhood. But honestly, that's about the extent of their use during the week. When they ring at 9, noon, and 5, they just mark those particular hours, but not much else.

You know what church bells were meant to do originally? Dates all the way back to the 400s AD. You know what they were meant to do? Call the faithful to worship. They didn't chime a familiar tune; they just rang whatever note they happened to make. But when the faithful heard it, they dropped what they were doing because they knew that it was time to gather.

It was almost like that notion of hearing the dinner bell ring. We never had something like a dinner bell growing up, but you picked up on how it was used. Kids are out playing, but then the dinner bell starts ringing, and that's when the kids know it's time to go home, because it's dinner time. Same sort of premise. You hear the bell ringing, and you know it's time to come worship. It called the faithful into assembly.

And I wonder sometimes, if we started considering the ringing of the bells in that same way again, how would that go over? Obviously, it wouldn't work quite the same way. Some folks live right around the church, but others don't. Others might not hear them at all, so the bells wouldn't do you much good as a call to worship. So instead we'd have to put together some kind of an app for our phones, which would sync up something like an alarm clock to go off when it was time to gather for worship. Yeah, how well do you think that would go over?

But I do wonder sometimes how we receive it: a call, a summons to gather? Would we treat it like an alarm clock? Hit the snooze button a few times, roll over in bed? Would we heed

the call, but really only begrudgingly—Eh, gotta drag myself out of bed and get myself over to church again. Or, would it come as a joyous reminder that we get to gather in the presence of God and in the fellowship of the faithful? I do wonder.

There's no question how this psalm of David imagines such a scenario. "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord!'" the psalm begins. And though much of this psalm focuses on a prayer for the city of Jerusalem, for its welfare, it shouldn't be too much of a jump for us to hear how this desire for gathering in the city of God was a joyful response to the call to assemble in the house of the Lord, which after all was in Jerusalem. "For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your God," the psalm ends.

So much is here on the notion of gathering in fellowship and in worship. All the tribes of Israel are called up to gather in the city. The house itself is a place of the righteous judgment of God. It's a place not for solitary retreat but for communal gathering, for relatives and friends. It is a place to gather and give thanks in the name of the Lord.

This is just a short psalm, but it captures something that is evident over and over again throughout the Old and New Testaments both: that gathering as the people of God is inseparable from seeking God in the first place.

Sometimes we might like to think that we can do the latter, seeking God, without the former, gathering as the people of God. Maybe we've convinced ourselves we can do that. "You know, I can commune with God and connect with God so much more on my own, so what need do I have for fellowship, for connection? No doubt we can and should at times retreat and seek God in prayer and in solitude. Jesus sure did. But you know what Jesus did too? He came back. He returned to fellowship, to community.

The problem that too many of us face is that we view the notion of worship, of fellowship, of community as mere exercises of convenience, rather than essential. And for decades, maybe longer, the leadership of the church—and not just our church, the whole church, especially in the United States—has indulged this approach. We have indulged it. Just come when you can, when it fits your schedule, when you don't have anything else going on. That's the signal we can send. And I don't want this to turn into a "You should feel bad for not coming to church, or for not coming to church more often, or for not coming to church in person." It's not that. It's acknowledging a failure of the church at large not to embody the sort of joyful essential that gathering in fellowship and worship truly is in the life of faith.

You know what a church is, what it literally is. The old word for it is *ekklesia*. If you've ever heard a big word like "ecclesiastical," it's referring to something about the church, but usually something institutional. Comes from the same place, but it's not referencing an institution,

at least not originally. It's an old world for *assembly*, for *gathering*, literally meaning *called out*. To be the church literally means to be a group called out. We cannot do it sitting back as individuals. It is impossible. If I believe that the life of faith is primarily about how me, myself, and I individually experience God, then I have not understood the call of Christ. We are called out into community, out of ourselves and into the shared life of the gospel.

What does it say about our faith, if this essential component of it is treated as something of a matter of convenience? What does it say about our faith if nearly any other obligation or scheduling conflict will trump the ringing of the bells, that call to assembly? What does it say about our faith if the first sentiment we feel when it comes to the call to worship isn't sharing the words of the psalm: "I was glad [I was glad!] when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord!'"?

It means maybe we've missed something. It means maybe we've taken it for granted. You want to hear what a joyful longing for the assembly of faith sounds like? Talk to someone who desperately wants to come, but can't.

I remember last year, one of our ushers Lee Hyde unfortunately had a stretch of health complications, such that prevented him from being in church for a period of time. I remember checking in with him over that stretch, and without fail, every time I talked with him, you know what he said, "I miss church, Jay. I miss church."

What if we tried to hear the joy behind that longing? "I miss church." What if instead of convenience we reclaimed the power of the community of faith, gathered in praise? It might look something like those old church bells ringing in some small medieval town, and upon hearing them, the faithful rise, perhaps joining in the words of the psalm: "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord!'"

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.