

Why Church?

A SERIES ON MISSION & PURPOSE



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AN INTRODUCTION

Over the next four weeks, we are asking a bold and honest question: Why Church? In a world filled with endless options, competing voices, and growing disillusionment with institutions, it's easy for people to choose other spaces to spend their time, energy, and resources. But the church, throughout history, has offered more. The church is not simply a place we go, but a community we commit to. It is a sacred space of healing, a place where formation happens with purpose, and a call to live out our faith through tangible trust in God's vision for a better world.

This series invites you not just into a pew, but into a purpose. The church is a place of transformation, not transaction. When we invite others into the church, we're offering a different way to live, grow, and belong.

Because We Belong to Something Bigger

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WEEK 1

I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace: there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

Ephesians 4:1-6

Reflexive imitation, mirroring behavior, and other forms of behavioral mimicry are psychological phenomena that help bond groups of people. It's why friend groups tend to dress alike, why teams have uniforms, and why Captain Holt insists that Jake Peralta wear a tie to work in the first episode of the first season of *Brooklyn 99*.

(Because it's a uniform! They're a team, and a tie is part of that team's uniform!)

When people imitate or mirror one another, it can foster a sense of camaraderie, trust, and sympathy, which is evolutionarily brilliant when you need to band together to face a common enemy. It's also socially brilliant when being a part of a group can prevent feelings of isolation and loneliness. Our brains automatically imitate those around us, whether it's vocabulary, facial expressions, or attire – and it's really not a bad thing in and of itself. Group mirroring can create difficulty, though, when groups look down on or treat those who don't “match” their dominant style as inferior.

In Ephesians, the author (believed by some scholars to be Paul, but by others to be a member of the Pauline school writing after Paul's death to further develop his theology) offers a powerful reminder to the church members there. The author says, begs, actually, that readers conduct themselves with humility, gentleness, and patience. While gentleness and patience were

considered classical virtues by moralists of the day, humility was considered a weakness, the proper attitude of an enslaved person. However, those of us in the church should not consider this an invitation to be insecure, weak, or to suffer oppression. Rather, this Pauline author reminds us that we are all humbled before our Creator, and that we are therefore unified in hope, peace, and above all, love.

This unity is different from human reflexive imitation or mimicry. It's something God has done already for those in the church. By our baptism, our call, and our faith in God through Christ and the Holy Spirit, we share this unity, whether or not we psychologically or literally mirror each other. This means that while human markers might distinguish us from one another, our faith says we aren't alone. While the world connects those who are similar – in looks, in social status, in socioeconomic class – in the church, we are connected by something deeper.

We are asked to stay bound to people we did not choose, who, on the surface, we might not be interested

in mimicking, and whom we can't fully control, which can be hard for many of us, admittedly, especially if we find more reflective affirmation in the social mirroring that happens in other groups. Yet, there is something in the church that is important to our souls. Perhaps, gentleness and patience, and yes, even humility, are as good for us as they are for our treatment of others. Maybe unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace provides a respite for us that we don't always know we need. We're invited to consider whether we're willing to belong to something bigger than our own preferences.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Is it harder or easier for me to be a part of a group that I have less influence or control over?

What do I value about the connections I have through church?

What might God be doing in my life through the community of faith?

BREATH PRAYER

Inhale: *I will bear with others in love,*

Exhale: *As they bear with me.*

DID YOU KNOW?!

Last year, our stewardship campaign goal was to increase pledges by \$73,000. We blew past that goal, increasing pledges by \$133,600!

MONEY MAKES A DIFFERENCE

On this year's Summer Youth Mission Trip with Ozark Mission Project, one team built a wheelchair ramp for a family whose limited mobility made it difficult for them to leave their home. On the final workday, the family experienced a medical emergency, and our students watched as paramedics used the new ramp to reach them quickly. The responders later thanked our kids for providing "life-saving seconds" when they mattered most. Experiences like this help our young people discover how they can make a tangible difference in others' lives.

Because the World Needs Something Different

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WEEK 2

Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice,

to undo the straps of the yoke,

to let the oppressed go free,

and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry

and bring the homeless poor into your house;

when you see the naked, to cover them

and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,

and your healing shall spring up quickly;

your vindicator shall go before you;

the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.

Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;

you shall cry for help, and he will say, "Here I am."

If you remove the yoke from among you,

the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,

*if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.
The Lord will guide you continually
and satisfy your needs in parched places
and make your bones strong,
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water
whose waters never fail.
Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.*

Isaiah 58:6-12

Have you ever heard the expression, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it"? While it's a helpful reminder not to waste time doing unnecessary things, this saying forces us to actually consider brokenness. *What does it mean to be broken? What does it look like to be fixed? Is this*

thing indeed broken? Truly assessing, defining, and determining the need for repair or restoration requires honesty and attention to detail. It takes looking at the potentially disturbed item from all angles, checking each connection, and combing through each component, not to mention making sure that it is, yes, plugged in.

Once the state of brokenness is determined, the next question is how to address it. Sometimes it's an easy fix, and sometimes it is much more complicated. Sometimes fixing one thing requires looking at all the other things around it that also need fixing. Like a loose thread, pulling in one place can create a disturbance elsewhere. When the fix seems more costly than living with the damage, it can be very tempting to leave broken things as they are.

Yet the church is called to be different. Our relationship with God demands that we be aware, not afraid to look closely and listen carefully, and be honest with the brokenness in our own hearts, as much as in the world around us. It reminds us that we aren't alone in this work.

The passage in Isaiah begins with a rhetorical question about the type of fast God prefers. To fast is to abstain from typical patterns of sustenance and indulgence. It's a common spiritual practice that helps us become aware of our bodily needs and desires in ways we might not otherwise be, especially in this day and age. Fasting breaks our rhythms and habits, and in doing so, allows us to assess whether brokenness exists in other ways around us and within us.

Yet we are quickly reminded that the Divine Presence is not concerned with fasting as an empty ritual, but rather with an action that addresses the real, tangible fractures in our society. Share your food with the hungry. Cover those who you see are exposed. Don't speak evil, blame one another, or make life harder for each other. It's almost as if the prophet on behalf of God is saying, *"Hey, in case you haven't noticed, there's actually a lot around you that is, in fact, broken, so before you do anything else, go ahead and fix it."*

God asks the church to help address the substantial

needs of our world and to do that in community. Don't think too much, don't count all the costs, don't wring your hands and worry about what else you might need to do. Just pay attention and do what you can see is needed. It will be enough and will lead to healing for you as well.

You shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

Isaiah shares a vision of radical repair, a call to loosen the bonds of injustice and become restorers of the breach. We are challenged to see the church as a bold alternative to a culture that ignores, ridicules, or, even worse, contributes to the breaking points around us. The church exists to heal, to nourish, and to stand in the gaps, and it can only do that when the people are willing.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What in my life seems harder to repair than to just let be?

What changes for me knowing that I am not called to repair things on my own?

Who in my life could use my help to experience restoration, and what would my first step be?

BREATH PRAYER

Inhale: *The Lord is my guide,*

Exhale: *The breach will be repaired.*

DID YOU KNOW?!

Since last year's Commitment Sunday, we've welcomed 30 new members!

MONEY MAKES A DIFFERENCE

When one of our longtime members who lives at C.C. Young recently needed additional support, our Congregational Care team was ready to respond. Because that member already had a dedicated visiting ministry volunteer, we reached out to arrange a visit - only to learn that the volunteer had already been there, offering care before we even asked. Through our Congregational Care ministry, members of our community know that they are remembered, supported, and loved.

Because Formation Doesn't Happen By Accident

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WEEK 3

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God's mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Romans 12:1-2

Formation is the process of being given shape and figure, to be made and to be made manifest. Like a sculptor with clay, formation can, without a doubt, apply to a tangible design, but it is certainly not limited to a physical thing. Our minds, our opinions, our lenses through which we see the world, can be formed as much as our bodies.

The truth is that we are always being formed by what we do (and what we don't do) as much as by what we read or watch or listen to. Our bodies, created and enlivened by God, respond to our actions and input. What we do and what we consume matter. In the same way, what we expose ourselves to emotionally, mentally, and spiritually also has a constant impact, shaping how we show up in the world for ourselves and others. What we allow to form us has significance.

The Apostle Paul, writing to the church in Rome, reminds this community of this exact point in the verses above. He offers a word of encouragement, saying, while you form your body (which for Paul is the whole self), do so as a way that honors God. This kind of worship makes sense in response to the gospel. He then offers a word of warning. He knows it's all too easy to conform to the whims and follies of the world around us, to let them shape us, and to yield our very formation to things that do not last or benefit us or those around us.

Finally, Paul offers a directive. Allow your mind to be renewed, which will transform you in ways that lead to discernment of God's will. Paul believes that it is possible to witness and understand God's work in the world, but one must be formed in the sacredness of God's goodness to do it.

Paul doesn't intend for this formation to happen in isolation. In fact, throughout this entire passage, he only uses the second person plural – you, y'all, you guys. He's speaking to a community, telling them that their renewal, their ability to discern God's presence in this world, is actually a group project.

When it gets it right, the church is a place of intentional growth and transformation. We can become more and more like the people God calls us to be, for the sake of discerning and then participating in what God is doing in the world. The church word for this kind of formation is discipleship, where we follow Jesus ever more closely, and are transformed into the hands and feet of Christ, children of God. But discipleship is not automatic, and

it's not necessarily fast. It takes time, commitment, and strength to resist conforming to what is not of God, and most of all, a willingness to let ourselves actually change.

Discipleship also takes community. It takes the people around us also seeking transformation by renewing their minds. It requires a releasing of control, a letting go, a sacrifice of what is for what God is doing *anew*.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Where do I feel like I've conformed to the world?

What is the church doing that seems to renew my mind?

How can I see God working in my life and in the world in a way I never have before?

BREATH PRAYER

Inhale: *I am not afraid of sacrifice,*

Exhale: *I am being transformed.*

DID YOU KNOW?!

Last year, more than half of our pledging households increased their pledges!

MONEY MAKES A DIFFERENCE

This year, two members of First UMC Dallas were recognized by Dallas Bethlehem Center, a South Dallas ministry providing food, education, and support to families in the community, for their faithful volunteer service. Both have spent years serving families through DBC's food ministry, where volunteers help neighbors select the groceries that best meet their needs rather than simply distributing pre-packed boxes. That approach creates opportunities not only to provide food but also to offer dignity, choice, and connection. Their service reflects the kind of relationships our missions ministry seeks to build throughout Dallas: showing up consistently, listening to our neighbors, and putting our faith into action.

Because Commitment Matters

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WEEK 4

He sat down opposite the treasury and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

Mark 12:41-44

Why Church? This is the overall question our series has been asking. Our world demands much from us – often loudly and quite relentlessly – promising much that it somehow fails to deliver on. If we would just buy this thing, go on this trip, sign up for this trial, follow this trend, our lives would be better and happier, and we

would arrive. Where, exactly? No one is actually sure, and the goal keeps moving.

This makes it actually hard to trust. We invest in various means to achieve what we think we want or need, and when they don't hit the mark or last as long as we expect, it's hard to think anything will. Where do we go to find true peace beyond understanding? Where can we grow in strength and humility? Where are we challenged and relieved to be part of something bigger than ourselves? Where can we find restoration while we help restore?

The church was created to be such a place where all may flourish and grow in love and knowledge of God, self, and others. It is the place that, by design, allows us to be ourselves and encourages us to be transformed – grace and hope together. The community of God's people, the body of Christ, requires participation, action, reflection, and commitment.

In the gospel of Mark (as well as in the gospel of Luke), we find a small, unprepossessing story wedged into the

greater section of Jesus in Jerusalem. He tells dramatic parables, he theologically spars with the religious leaders, and he foretells destruction, persecution, and the end of days. He has moved from simply being a teacher and healer to an apocalyptic prophet and Beloved Son of God.

Amid all these big movements and important discourses, Jesus notices something incredibly small, something that could easily have gone unnoticed, either because it was common enough or because it seemed to have no bearing on the great actions involving more prominent people.

Jesus notices a widow, one of the least powerful members of society, entering the Temple treasury. This space was a public courtyard, open to all Jews, created to allow people to voluntarily give in support of the temple's worship and charity. People could easily access it and add their gifts throughout the day. The treasury contained 13 large trumpet-shaped receptacles, made of metal. When someone gave, the sound of the coins

rattling down the funnel would be proportional to the amount deposited. The more coins, the louder and more attention-getting the gift's noise.

The widow's two coins were the smallest unit of money at the time. They would have made almost no sound, especially over the potential bustle of the courtyard itself. Yet Jesus sees (or hears) what others overlook. This poor woman, with almost no social power or standing, gives a gift that is not flashy or attention-getting, but full of trust, trust that the temple – the center of the community that represents their relationship to God – will use her gift well. She, as low as she is, is still part of the community and has quite possibly benefited from it in the past. A recognition of cyclical blessing that moves through the faithful body. She is committed to her identity as part of the connection and is willing to trust in that with all she has.

Commitment to our community is not about an amount. It is about what we believe God can do when we entrust our resources to God's work. This is not just about

supporting a budget. It is about embodying our mission through faithful generosity. We trust our community with our gifts, we are open to transformation, and we believe in collective restoration. That's *why church*.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What does my giving say about where I'm placing my trust?

How has my community blessed me?

How might I bless others through my generosity?

BREATH PRAYER

Inhale: *The Lord sees what I can give,*

Exhale: *I give abundantly.*

DID YOU KNOW?!

44 families and individuals made a pledge for 2026 who hadn't pledged the year before!

MONEY MAKES A DIFFERENCE

For generations, our Music & Arts ministry has given people at First UMC Dallas a place to share their gifts, build lasting community, and help create meaningful worship experiences for others. As one longtime Chancel Choir member reflected, "I love singing for my own enjoyment, but more importantly, I enjoy being able to share that gift with our congregation and hopefully add something meaningful to our worship together." This past May's celebration honoring Dana and Tim showed just how many lives this ministry has touched over the years. As we look ahead, we're excited to build on their work, bringing back old traditions and making a few new ones along the way.

NOTES



First United Methodist Church, Dallas

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firstchurchdallas.org/give