



S O J O U R N

Neighborhood Parish Primer

*Joining the Father, Son, and Spirit in the
historic work of redemption...*

Introduction

The Sojourn Houston family of churches is organically connected by a growing network of missional communities called Neighborhood Parishes. These Neighborhood Parishes are groups of men, women, and children living as smaller expressions of the church, manifesting the redemptive presence of God to their immediate neighbors. We believe the Church is a family on mission, joining the Father, Son, and Spirit in the historic work of redemption. In tandem with Sojourn's weekly Sunday Gatherings, we desire to see our Neighborhood Parishes give expression to these convictions.

Immediately after multiplying, new Neighborhood Parishes undergo a 4-week process called *incubation*. This primer is designed to guide, resource, and facilitate discussion as your diverse team pursues a unified vision for life and ministry within the "allotted periods and boundaries of their dwelling place," the neighborhood (Acts 17:26).

Before you begin, pray to the Father, in the name of Jesus, that through Scripture, through the sermons on Sunday, through everyday communal life, and through the words of this primer, the Holy Spirit would work mightily in your midst to produce repentance, holiness, and deep, abiding unity. Pray for His help in moving your parish from theory to practice, from good intentions to grace-driven action, from talking about living on mission to becoming a true gospel community eager to join God in the work of redemption.

How to Use this Primer

Weeks 1-3 include written content meant to be read aloud, questions for discussion, and prompts for prayer. Feel free to read ahead and come prepared with questions and comments, and please take your time working through the content. Parish Leaders especially should be well-prepared to facilitate a meaningful discussion. This primer is by no means perfect (it's not Scripture), but we nonetheless encourage you to read it for all its worth. If you have any questions, please contact your cohort leader.

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Week 1: We are Saints

We are “loved by God and called to be saints” (Romans 1:7).



Read: Ephesians 1 & 1 Peter 2:1-12

The Bible often refers to Christians as *saints*. The name suggests that we have been consecrated to God as a holy priesthood and have rejected the ways of the world, bearing true and faithful witness to Christ in speech and lifestyle (1 Peter 2:9-12). As a priesthood, the Church guards, serves, and mediates the relationship between God and the rest of the world.

In some Christian traditions, sainthood is awarded posthumously to particularly faithful Christians, but the New Testament considers each and every Christ-follower a saint. Saints, then, are living individuals who have dedicated themselves to the worship and service of God. In Christ, we are loved by God and called to serve Him together.

To be “in Christ” is to share in all that Christ has accomplished. By our union with the Son, we share in every spiritual blessing from the Father (Ephesians 1:3). Jesus has made us into all that we were created to be. The Holy Spirit even brings our future blessings into the present age, working in us to grow us into all that we’ve already been made in Christ. This is a glorious paradox! We are holy saints in Christ Jesus, even as we’re learning to live accordingly.

Gospel: Who is God and what has He done?

After man rebelled against God in Genesis 3, God drew near and promised to bring about redemption and reconciliation (Genesis 3:15). Humanity deserved condemnation, but God was merciful and gracious. He clarified and amplified this promise of redemption by making covenants (binding agreements) with His people throughout history. Ultimately, God desired to bless His people, the nation of Israel, and to dwell with them, to be present with them, so that they could be a blessing to others. He desired that His people should be fruitful and multiply and serve as His representatives. They were called to be a kingdom of priests, mediating the relationship between God and the rest of the world. But instead, they kept rebelling. This caused them to long for the promised Messiah, who would deliver them once and for all.

These covenants revealed the heart of God for His people, but they were all pointing forward to a better covenant. They were all pointing forward to Jesus! In Him, we see the heart of God most clearly. Christ was willing to give up everything, to humble Himself, to be reviled, and to bear God's wrath against sin despite His own innocence. This is the character of God. He is the prodigal Father who runs to greet us in His Son, to make us family, and to bring us home to be His people.

Church: Who has God called and created us to be?

So Israel failed to obey God, which prevented them from becoming the holy priesthood they were called to be. But today, Christians look not to their own obedience; they look to the obedience of Christ. Because Christ obeyed God perfectly, the Church, His Body, has become that holy priesthood. Let's consider this reality for a moment.

- We are a *holy* priesthood. We are called to be holy as God is holy (1 Peter 1:16). The local church should be a place where God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. We are to "live in a manner worthy of the gospel" (Philippians 1:27), leading lives of godliness, informed by the truth of the gospel (Titus 1:1; 2:11-12). As a people of light, we are called to shine in the darkness (1 John 1:5-7). We are called to be distinct.
- We are a holy *priesthood*. As a priesthood, we guard, serve, and mediate the relationship between God and the nations. We together demonstrate God's gospel blessings to those who do not yet know Him. And we accomplish this by (1) loving our neighbors in concrete ways, by caring for widows and orphans and all who are in need (James 1:27; Galatians 6:10), and (2) by carrying the gospel message across the street and to the very ends of the earth (Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8).

When our neighbors peek into the life of a Neighborhood Parish, they should see that Jesus offers something desirable (Titus 2:1-10; 2 Corinthians 2:14-15). May all who see our good deeds be compelled to glorify God (1 Peter 2:12)!

Thus, it should be made clear that Sojourn's methodology is deeply rooted in Sojourn's theology. Our long-term, low-key, and relational form of ministry through the Neighborhood Parish should not be reduced to mere trend. Our model, our strategy, the way we're organized for mission, is a direct reflection of our theological convictions. This is who God has called His saints to be.

Mission: What has God saved and sent us to do?

There are many ways in which our *being in Christ* informs our *doing for Christ*. For instance, a welcoming Neighborhood Parish is indiscriminately welcoming because God was indiscriminate in welcoming sinners like us (Romans 15:7). In the same way, we forgive because we have been forgiven (Ephesians 4:32). But welcoming and forgiving are not merely deeds to be done in response to God's grace. We are the welcomed, and we are the forgiven. It's fundamental to our identity as the people of God.

So ultimately, our *doing* is rooted in our *being*. We do what we do because we are who we are in Christ. And what is the Church called to do? We are called (1) to live as disciples and (2) to make disciples. In other words, we are called to live as a holy priesthood, together guarding, serving, and mediating the relationship between God and our neighbors.

The Great Commandment: Matthew 22:37–40

And he said to him, "You shall **love the Lord your God** with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall **love your neighbor** as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

The Great Commission: Matthew 28:18–20

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and **make disciples** of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

These two passages are commonly called the Great Commandment and the Great Commission, respectively. At Sojourn, we don't believe one is inherently more "missional" than the other. Ultimately, our commission to "make disciples of all nations" is a call to fulfill our role as a holy priesthood. As God saves His people through our priestly ministry, we baptize them into the Church, we consecrate them into the priesthood, and we teach them to live as priests. And what does it mean to live as priests? It means to love God and neighbor.

Thus, we believe a Neighborhood Parish marked by obedience to the Great Commandment will be distinct and attractive before the watching world, which will give us ample opportunities to speak gospel truth and fulfill the Great Commission.

At Sojourn, we pursue faithfulness as disciple makers by (1) building relationships, (2) exposing them to the Christian community, and (3) sharing the gospel. In other words, this is an everyday approach to God's most fundamental call on our lives. We fulfill this calling through long-term, low-key, and relational forms of ministry. We fulfill this calling in the midst of ordinary life.

When we read the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), we see Jesus engaging in this long-term, low-key, and relational form of ministry. Everyday life provided the context for His ministry. Likewise, the early church took a patient, ordinary approach to their disciple-making efforts. They devoted themselves to the ordinary ministry of Word and Sacrament. They prioritized prayer and fellowship. And in the course of everyday life, awe came upon every soul, and the Lord grew them in number (Acts 2:42-47).

Understanding this means that "taking the Great Commission seriously" does not necessitate a cluttered calendar. Jesus does not call His saints to a life of busyness; He calls us to a life of purpose. The mission of God does not require that we quit our jobs, refuse to take vacations, or renounce all forms of entertainment. On the contrary, the mission of God requires that we do all things for His glory! The mission of God gives purpose to every moment of every day, even those moments that seem utterly ordinary and mundane. As saints, our ordinary lives are redeemed and made useful as we approach our daily activities with newfound intentionality.

Discuss

Imagine for a moment that your Neighborhood Parish is actually a church plant in a foreign country. In a real sense, you're already strangers and exiles here in Houston, but imagine yourselves in a new city and a new country. Discuss the following:

- What criteria would be most important in deciding where to live?
- How would you approach employment?
- What standard of living would you expect?
- What would you spend your time doing?
- What opportunities would you be looking for?
- What would your prayers be like?
- What would you expect of one another?
- How would you conduct your meetings together?

In light of your discussion, spend some time praying together.

Week 2: We are Family

We are “members of the household of God” (Ephesians 2:19).



Read: Romans 8:12-23, Galatians 3:28-4:7

When you hear the word “family,” what comes to mind? Belonging, security, love, and loyalty? Pain, division, anger, and jealousy? For most of us, our concept of family incorporates a mixture of these attributes. Even the Bible is thoroughly acquainted with the brokenness of families, and yet “family” is perhaps the most prominent metaphor for the Church in the New Testament.

In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve sin against God. In Genesis 4, one of their sons murders the other. So the message is clear: sin has brought destruction and disunity. But God never gave up on the family. In fact, Jesus came to *redeem* a family, the Church.

When we talk about the Neighborhood Parish as a family, we’re not simply taking an idea you already understand in order to teach that Christians are expected to love one another. It’s actually much deeper than that. In saying that the Neighborhood Parish is a family, we’re suggesting that biological families point to the church family and can only properly function within the church family. The household of God, the family we’ve been adopted into, is the family we were created for. This is where we learn to give and receive love appropriately. This is where we find true, eternal belonging and purpose.

J.I. Packer writes:

If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God’s child, and having God as his Father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all... ‘Father’ is the Christian name for God. Our understanding of Christianity cannot be better than our grasp of adoption.

This week, we will discuss the implications of the doctrine of our adoption. We now have God as a Heavenly Father, and that wonderful truth should pervade our lives together as brothers and sisters within the household of God.

Gospel: Who is God and what has He done?

Our adoption is accomplished by the Triune God. In accordance with the eternal love of the Father, the Son was sent to redeem us from the law's threat of punishment by becoming a curse for us. "[The Father] sent forth his Son... so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Galatians 4:4-5). And now, the Spirit of the Father's Son, the Spirit of adoption, assures us that we are God's children and enables us to cry out to our Heavenly Father (Romans 8:15-16). So the Trinity planned our adoption and accomplished all that was necessary to adopt us. We are sons and daughters.

This doctrine of our adoption reverberates deep within our souls, all throughout the cosmos, and everywhere in between. Our adoption triggers the healing of all creation (Romans 8:19). As God's heirs, we are guaranteed this royal inheritance: a just and reconciled world where Christ is exalted as the Lord and Savior of all things.

Thus, "church as family" is not an end in itself. It's inextricably tied to God's cosmic plan of redemption. As we overlap our lives within the household of God, as we love one another as brothers and sisters, we give expression to our future hope, which is also the future hope of all creation.

Church: Who has God called and created us to be?

Healthy families eat together, play together, cry together, and laugh together. They provide for one another. They share the responsibility of nurturing children in the Lord, and they look after their older members. Families provide identity and a place of belonging. They define for us what is "home." Families experience conflict, but they do not stop being families as a result. Members of a healthy family do not simply opt for another family that better aligns with their preferences. They find ways to resolve their conflict and frustrations.

In ancient Israel, families were very different. They spanned multiple generations and often included members who were not biologically related. Their boundaries were blurred, which is why we see clans, tribes, and even entire nations described as family. Within this context, with this understanding, the Israelite converts who penned the New Testament described the Church as a family. It's an intergenerational and inclusive place of belonging and identity, and its boundaries are blurred. The Church is both a local family *and* a global family.

This is partly why Sojourn Houston is comfortable blurring the boundaries between a particular local church and a family of churches, between our distinctiveness and our

oneness. We want to be interdependent local churches, and we want to look to one another for everything described above. In other words, we want every relationship—person to person, parish to parish, and church to church—to present a faithful witness to the world as to the redemption that was triggered by our adoption.

We live in a fragmented society. Relationships are fragmented. Politics are fragmented. The truth itself is fragmented. And because truth has become a matter of individual choice, we are left with no shared basis for communal life or social cohesion. This is ultimately a failure to integrate our distinctiveness with our oneness, and it has resulted in a radicalized form of individuality where personal freedom is paramount and we avoid taking responsibility for one another. Each of us is answerable only to ourselves, and the result is fragmentation.

But the triunity of God shows us that relationship is fundamental to our personhood. “No man is an island,” wrote John Donne. And as Christians, we are interdependent and bound to one another in holy love. We are members of one household. This sort of communal life will be a tangible witness to a world that desperately needs to see distinctiveness and oneness integrated.

Mission: What has God saved and sent us to do?

Within a healthy family, we feel the freedom to be ourselves, for better or worse, the good and the bad. Within the Neighborhood Parish, we express this freedom by exercising our spiritual gifts for the common good and confessing our burdens and sins. By the power of the Holy Spirit, who both gifts us and convicts us, this dual practice builds up the body in love and serves as a witness to our non-Christian neighbors, who we invite to *belong* even before they *believe*. On the one hand, serving the common good demonstrates the power of the gospel to change a society. And on the other hand, genuine repentance sends a message our neighbors desperately need to hear: Christians are not perfect. We mess up. But we belong to a Father and a family marked by grace and forgiveness.

Indeed, Christ has designed His Body in such a way that we depend upon one another for growth, progress, and effectiveness. We were never meant to live out our spiritual journey in isolation. Each and every member of this household has a role to play in serving our common good *and* in serving our non-Christian neighbors. Because we are on God’s mission *together* as a Neighborhood Parish, we can take the pressure off the individual to be gifted in every way. You may not be the most hospitable person. You may be more gifted as a teacher. But non-Christians need both to be welcomed *and* to

be taught. So by working together, the Neighborhood Parish presents a more full, more compelling gospel witness.

From Genesis to Revelation, we see God revealing Himself to a family, and through that family, revealing Himself to the world. He called Abraham's family to be a blessing to all the families of the earth (Genesis 12:3). The nation of Israel, Abraham's descendants, were again called to be a blessing to the nations (Exodus 19:5-6). And today, the Church, the family of God, His holy nation, is called to be a blessing to all the families and all the nations of the earth (Acts 3:25, Matthew 28:18-20).

So as a Neighborhood Parish, we are together called to be a persuasive witness to the gospel by the manner in which we love one another (John 13:35). This is costly and difficult, but it's beautiful and powerful and worth giving our lives to. In fact, we must approach communal living with theological conviction if we truly hope to endure the frustrations of life together. We must believe that God has determined allotted periods and boundaries for our dwelling, that God has given us *this* particular group of people in *this* particular neighborhood, for our good and for His glory (Acts 17:26). Only then can we set aside our self-interest and truly love one another.

Discuss

When a non-Christian visits our parish gathering, what do we want for them to see, hear, and experience? What do we NOT want for them to see, hear, and experience? How can we begin preparing for these things now?

Read Romans 12:3-8. What have we been gifted to do well? What spiritual gifts should we continue asking the Holy Spirit to bring to our parish family?

What will shared leadership look like in our parish?

Pray together for the following:

- Gifts and talents exercised for the common good
- Vulnerability and genuine repentance
- A family culture marked by grace and forgiveness
- Non-Christian presence

Week 3: We are Sojourners

We are citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20).



Read: Deuteronomy 10:12-19, 1 Peter 2:9-12

In the book of 1 Peter, Christians are described as “sojourners and exiles” (1 Peter 2:11). But according to Ephesians, Christians are “no longer strangers and aliens” (Ephesians 2:19). This is a paradox of the Christian life. Within the kingdom of man, we are sojourners and exiles, but within the Kingdom of God, we are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. We live in two worlds simultaneously.

A sojourner is a person who comes from a foreign country into a city or land to dwell there with the natives temporarily. The sojourner dwells meaningfully, but ultimately, the sojourner is just passing through. Hebrews 11 describes what sojourning meant for Israel’s Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob):

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God... These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth (Hebrews 11:8–10, 13).

Abraham was called to sojourn even as he hoped for a future inheritance, a “city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.” The Church has much to learn from Abraham’s faithfulness as a sojourner, and yet, our situation is significantly different (Hebrews 11:13). Abraham sojourned on the basis of *unfulfilled* promises, but Christians sojourn on the basis of *fulfilled* promises. Abraham was a sojourner *without* a home, but Christians are sojourners *with* a home. Because we are in Christ, Christians presently enjoy every blessing for which Abraham hoped.

Even though we sojourn here, “our citizenship is in heaven” (Philippians 3:20). We are dual citizens, sojourners dwelling meaningfully even as we long for a better home.

Gospel: Who is God and what has He done?

Paul was a prisoner in Rome when he sent his letter to the Philippians. The city of Philippi was a Roman colony (Acts 16:12), which meant that the culture and customs in Philippi were thoroughly and distinctly Roman. This provided a noteworthy context for Paul's words concerning heavenly citizenship (Philippians 3:20). The Philippians were no doubt proud of their Roman citizenship, and yet that citizenship was secondary and subject to a greater loyalty.

When Christians confess that Jesus is Lord (Romans 10:9), we declare that He has power and authority over us. Christ is our King, and we are citizens of His Kingdom. He commands our primary loyalty.

This dual citizenship affirms the essential goodness of the physical world. We are not called to choose between the physical and the spiritual; we are called to live as body-and-soul beings on a pilgrimage to a heavenly land of promise. The fact of our exile does not mean that we don't care what becomes of our surrounding culture. We exert whatever influence we're given as joy-filled and broken-hearted sojourners. Just as Philippi was a colony of Rome, the Church is a colony of heaven. And as far as it concerns neighbor-love and social justice and submission to the governing authorities, citizens of heaven should be model citizens on earth.

Indeed, because we are in Christ, we are the Israel of God, a holy kingdom living amidst the kingdoms of man (Galatians 6:16). Jesus is building the Church into all that Israel was called to be.

Church: Who has God called and created us to be?

Like the nation of Israel, the Church has been redeemed to be a kingdom of priests sojourning through the wilderness. However, the Church is not set apart by race, language, culture, clothing, circumcision, or other rituals; the Church is set apart by our allegiance to Christ and the honorable conduct we keep in His name (1 Peter 2:12).

As God's sojourning people, we are the medium through which God intends to proclaim the gospel. Together, we offer a place of identity and belonging marked by a truly liberating message. Our holy manner of living is meant to adorn our message and help our neighbors to interpret our message (Deuteronomy 4:5-8). As each and every Neighborhood Parish sojourns here in Houston, we pray that our non-Christian neighbors will come to believe the gospel as they see its implications lived out.

Because we intend to dwell meaningfully here in Houston, we have the freedom to adopt a long-term, low-key, and relational form of ministry. Like Jesus, we can live calm and patient lives even as we share an urgent gospel message. Here at Sojourn, our disciple-making method involves three essential elements: (1) building relationships, (2) exposing those relationships to the Christian community, and (3) sharing the gospel.

Once again, this long-term, low-key, and relational form of ministry is meant to take place within the context of everyday life. In order to facilitate this, Sojourn churches hope to limit the number of schedule-filling programs and events that pull Christians from their primary missionary context, the neighborhood.

Mission: What has God saved and sent us to do?

After Jesus was crucified, the disciples, traumatized and fearing the world outside, locked themselves in a room. As they were hiding, Jesus appeared to them and said, "Peace be with you." He showed them His scars, and they saw that their Master had truly been resurrected. So Jesus repeated himself, "Peace be with you," and added, "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you" (John 20:19–23).

The Father sent His Son to take on human form and live within our world. Jesus came to identify with us and interact with us. But ultimately, He was sent so that the world might be reconciled to God (John 12:44-46). In the same way, we are called to live local, indigenous lives (Jeremiah 29:4-7), identifying with our neighbors and interacting with our neighbors so that they might be reconciled to God.

Elsewhere, Jesus refers to His people as the "light of the world" (Matthew 5:14-16). This light must never lock itself in a room. This light must labor to illuminate the darkness, even when the darkness hates the light. Thus, sojourners do not walk with swagger. Sojourners live peaceful and quiet lives in the land of their sojourning (1 Timothy 2:2). We defend the truth ardently, but we do so remembering that the Church age is a time for unyielding joy and unremitting grace (1 Peter 3:15). Christian exiles measure greatness by service, not success.

In 586 BC, Jerusalem was destroyed and the people of Israel was taken to Babylon by force. They were sojourners and exiles in the city, and the prophet Jeremiah received a word from the Lord:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the **exiles** whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take

wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare (Jeremiah 29:4–7).

God’s will for the nation of Israel in exile revealed a long-term (build houses), low-key (plant gardens), and relational (marry and bear children) approach to service and ministry in the city. God’s people were called to multiply within the city and pray for the city’s welfare. This call to a life of sojourning presupposes a robust confidence in the sufficiency of Christ, and the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) expresses this confidence beautifully:

Q: What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A: That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

To fulfill our purpose as a Neighborhood Parish, we must have practical confidence in our own identity and destiny as the people of God. We know who we are. We belong to Christ. And we’re headed home.

Discuss

Read the paragraph at the top of page 13. How can we avoid mistaking frenzied activity for faithfulness to God’s mission? How should we define “ministry success” in this neighborhood over the next 10 years?

Where in this neighborhood do we see an opportunity to bless our city and seek its welfare? How and when will we accomplish this?

How can we make prayer for non-Christians a regular part of our life together?

Spend some time in prayer for the city of Houston.

Week 4: The Sunday Gathering

We are a family of sojourning saints.



This week, we hope to spend a good portion of the evening in prayer. Our doors will soon open to the neighborhood, and we need the Holy Spirit's help as we seek to apply everything we've learned and discussed over these past few weeks.

But before we pray, let's take a few minutes to discuss the Sunday Gathering. At Sojourn, we obviously think very highly of the Neighborhood Parish. It's the backbone of our vision for the city of Houston. But the Neighborhood Parish has limitations; it simply cannot provide all that we need for life and godliness. So we must not pendulum swing away from all that's taking place when the saints gather together on Sundays. The Neighborhood Parish and the Sunday Gathering are both indispensable to the health of our churches. Both feature essential elements of the Christian life that we cannot get anywhere else, so we must not neglect to meet together in either setting.

The writer of Hebrews had the following to say about the Sunday Gathering:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, **let us draw near** with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. 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 (Hebrews 10:19-25).

In the original Greek, the phrase "let us draw near" (in bold above) is a well-known liturgical expression, an expression associated with corporate worship. In other words, the church is being called out to "enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus," to enter the sanctuary. Indeed, the church is a "called-out assembly" (an *ekklesia*).

When we gather for corporate worship on Sunday, it's because God has summoned us. We are more than a loosely connected community rallying together for fellowship and

some friendly instruction. We don't gather because "it's what Christians have always done" or because Sundays work best for our schedules; we gather because God is using this weekly ceremony to renew His promises and give us a foretaste of the eternal Sabbath "Day" (verse 25) that awaits us in glory.

Silence, solitude, and private prayer are tremendously important disciplines, but we simply cannot be Christians by ourselves. Apparently, the dangerous temptation toward isolated Christianity was present in the early church, much like today. So the writer of Hebrews reminds us: never neglect to meet together (verse 25).

What happens on Sunday?

Since the early church, the people of God have come together on Sundays for Word and sacrament, even when doing so put their lives in danger. Through weekly instruction and gospel proclamation, we "hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering" (Hebrews 10:23). And as we administer the sacraments (Baptism and the Lord's Supper) in obedience to Christ, we take the Word that was preached and we put it on display. As we discussed last week, we are body-and-soul beings, so the sacraments are meant to dramatize spiritual realities in physical form. We hear the Word through the ear, and then we partake of the Word through the eyes and nose and hands and mouth.

Interestingly, the passage we read above (Hebrews 10:19-25) is rich with sacramental imagery. We are welcomed into the holy places "by the blood" of Christ and "through His flesh." Our hearts have been "sprinkled clean" and our bodies have been "washed with pure water." These may not be specific references to the sacraments, but at the very least, they give context to the sacramental imagery we observe each Sunday.

God knows that our faith needs strengthening, and He confirms His promises to us through these sacraments. That is why the sacraments are intended to point to Jesus and His work on our behalf, without respect to the strength of our faith. God is once again validating His peace treaty with us. There is *still* grace for the people of God. In Baptism and the Lord's Supper, God graciously reminds us, "I will be your God, and you will be My people."

Sojourn churches also walk through corporate liturgies on Sundays. A liturgy is simply a form according to which public worship is ordered. Liturgies are meant to shape what we love and desire and value, and every church has one. But our goal at Sojourn is to adorn the ordinary ministries of Word and sacrament by rightly positioning them within the full drama of God's redeeming action. In other words, our liturgy is meant to tell a

story, and as we are immersed in that story, as we rehearse the gospel drama week after week, the story begins to shape what we love and desire and value.

The narrative arc (or plot) of this drama comes in four acts: (1) God is holy, (2) we are sinners, (3) Jesus saves us, (4) Jesus sends us. And we move through this narrative together using corporate prayers, both sung and spoken. Praying and singing together facilitates unity in worship. And, like a trellis, these corporate prayers teach our wandering hearts to weave our thoughts and feelings up to God. This also speaks to the importance of arriving on time each Sunday. When we miss the first act of the narrative arc, the rest of the story makes no sense.

Conclusion

In short, when we are absent on Sunday mornings, we miss out on more than just a sermon. We cannot podcast sacraments or liturgies or fellowship. So we must not prioritize the Neighborhood Parish over and above the weekly church assembly. Both are essential to our growth and godliness.

Discuss

Each and every week, people visit our Sunday Gatherings longing for a relationship with God and meaningful human connection. How can we help integrate Sunday visitors into the life of our parish?

How can we use our gifts and talents on Sundays?

Pray together for the following:

- Unity and oneness as we open our doors to the neighborhood
- Vulnerability and genuine repentance
- A family culture marked by grace and forgiveness
- The salvation of our non-Christian neighbors
- Multiplication of future parishes and churches