

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

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Why do people go to church?

Well, some people come for the music, especially at those big churches with professional musicians and choirs that rival the Mormons. And some come to meet and make friends, surrogate families, if you will. Some come to meet their future husband or wife and others come because they always have and it just wouldn't seem right not to; Sunday morning would be kinda strange if all we did was drink coffee, read the New York Times, and listen to NPR. Some come so their children won't be completely biblically illiterate and some come hoping for someone to tell their kids what to do and not do, you know, moral instruction.

I mean, there are all sorts of reasons why people go to church, right?

WRONG!

Turns out those are all secondary reasons. The vast majority of people who go to church go there for only one thing: **to meet Jesus**. No, really! They do. A church can have the greatest choir or praise band in the world but, after a while, people get tired of going to church just to hear a Sunday morning concert. If they aren't meeting Jesus at church, the music will get old no matter how good it is.

WHY GO TO CHURCH?

Several years ago, the Barna Research Group, one of the world's foremost research centers regarding church and religion in America, released some more of their findings about why people, especially those in the Millennial generation, born between 1981 and 1996, aren't going to church. Basically, it can be boiled down into two reasons:

1. I'm not meeting Jesus at church; and
2. The church isn't making the world a better place.

In other words, from their perspective, the Christian church, in all of its modern permutations, is not keeping the Great Commandment, that is, to love one another (Mat. 22: 36-40), nor is it living out the Great Commission to go into the world and make disciples of Jesus Christ, (Matt. 28: 19-20).

Of course, Barna says, this is not news. A decline in church attendance for these or similar reasons has been happening for decades. It's just being felt more now because the numbers are growing.

People come to church to meet Jesus, up close and personal, face to face. They want and expect not just to hear about Jesus but to have an encounter with the Living Christ. They are hungry for that encounter; they need it to warm their hearts and give their lives meaning,

direction, depth and authenticity. And they want to be part of something that is actually improving our lives and the lives of generations to come.

At roughly the same time George Barna was doing his research, the George Gallup organization was doing some complimentary work as well. He asked people who go to church at least once a month why they go. He offered seven reasons why a person might go to church and asked them to check all that apply to them.

Seventy six percent said they go to hear sermons that teach about and explain the Bible. Seventy five percent said they came to hear sermons that relate their religious beliefs to real life. Some come for the music, some for the preaching. A few come to meet their neighbors. Very few come to meet the minister. Most are coming to meet God as God is revealed to us in the Jesus Christ of Scripture.

Like those two disciples walking to Emmaus on that first Easter afternoon, people today are at loose ends, looking for direction, and asking us to help them find it through Jesus Christ. But how do we do that? Let's turn to scripture to see what guidance it offers.

WHY GO TO EMMAUS?

No one really knows where the town of Emmaus was located. Biblical scholars have made some informed guesses and the most popular theory is that it sat where modern day Moza sits, about seven miles outside Jerusalem. There is no commemorative site there, however. No plaque on the wall or anything.

So, this is another biblical story that falls into what's becoming a common theme for us: ***I don't know if this story really happened this way, but I know it's true.*** Two disciples who have never been mentioned before this story, are downcast by the death of Jesus, and confused by reports that his body is missing, and they are walking the seven-mile hike from Jerusalem to Emmaus for reasons we do not know. Perhaps they are returning home or they are taking the news of Jesus' death to other followers of Jesus. On the road they encounter a stranger who listens to their concerns, then gives them a scripture lesson that makes their "hearts burn within them".

Perhaps you've had this kind of experience, yourself. Someone preaches a sermon or tells a story or just chats with you and all of a sudden, you feel this warmth kind of flow over you like oil and you realize that you now know something that you never knew before, something that changes your whole perspective. Or maybe you see something, a thing you've seen a million times, but this time you see it differently as though it's the first time. It's that head slapping moment when you say to yourself, "Why didn't I see that, why didn't I understand that when it's been right there in front of me all this time?"

Well, that's what they experienced on the road as the miles just fell away under their feet and before they realize how far they've gone, there they are in Emmaus. The stranger bids them farewell but they don't want to let him go. Oh, please, can't you stay for just a while longer? Look, it will be dark soon and you don't want to be wandering around in a strange town after the sun goes down. They probably even offer to spring for dinner.

So, the stranger demurs and agrees to share the evening meal with them. He breaks the bread and, immediately, they recognize him. It's Jesus! And, at that moment, the risen Christ disappears from their sight, so they immediately leap from the table and hurry back 7 miles to Jerusalem to tell the others of their experience.

The identity of the two disciples is as mysterious as the location of Emmaus. Theories have abounded over the years. Some have theorized that they might have been father and son, others insist that they were just friends, and still others hypothesize that they were husband and wife.

The gospel writer Luke says that one of them was named Cleophas which is the Greek version of the Aramaic name, Clopas. The gospel of John identifies one of the women who stood with Mary, the mother of Jesus, at the crucifixion as Mary, wife of Clopas. (John 19)

From this point we now step into early Christian tradition (mythology?) which conjectures that Cleophas was the brother of Joseph, father of Jesus and his wife, Mary, was the sister-in-law of Mary, mother of Jesus.

The same tradition says the other unnamed disciple was the youngest son of Cleophas, called Simeon — who later served for 43 years as head of the Judeo-Christian Church in Palestine and was martyred at the age of 120. But there's no evidence for that in scripture.

Several other candidates for the companion of Cleophas have been suggested, including his wife Mary. But whoever these two are, the most important thing is their interaction with the resurrected Christ.

Remember, they were disciples of this man, yet they did not recognize him when they were actually talking to him in an up close and personal way. Apparently, they knew him from afar but did not recognize him when they were close to him, face to face, as it were.

They only come to realize who he is when he does something that he has done with them before. As he did with the 5,000 and as he did with the Twelve on the night before his arrest, and as he had probably done scores of times with them, he breaks bread and shares it with them.

And that's when they recognize him.

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

The story of the meeting on the road to Emmaus is a story for the church.

Thousands of human souls are out there in the world, hungering not for information about Jesus, but for an encounter with the real, living, resurrected Christ. They want and need, as Marcus Borg put it, the experience of *Meeting Jesus Again, For the First Time*. They want him to impact their lives in a real, concrete, visceral, undeniable, compelling way.

They are, like the two people in the story, empty, disappointed, burned out, and looking for something not just to believe but to believe in and this story calls upon us to take on the role Jesus models here, to explain and interpret the scriptures for them and to teach them how it applies to their lives.

The fact is that opportunities to meet Jesus abound. They are all around us every day. He walks with me and he talks with me, as the old hymn says. He is with us in the sound of a child's laughter, in the tears of joy when one who was lost is found, in the love of family and friends. He is with us in the joy we feel when one we love succeeds, in our grief, in our elation, in our sorrow, in our celebration, in our loss and in our triumph. Jesus is with us, close by, and all we have to do is open our eyes and our hearts to his presence.

Football great, Archie Griffin, never had a greater fan than this Methodist preacher standing before you. I was a fan when he played for Ohio State (1972-75) and became the only college player ever to win the Heisman Trophy twice. I was a super fan when he came to my hometown to play professional football as a Cincinnati Bengal.

I loved his drive and his tenacity and his humble yet articulate, self-deprecating manner. When the NFL said he was too small for professional football (5'9" and 185 pounds) I positively glowed every time he made a first down. I knew his number "45" and had a jersey with that number on it. But I didn't need to see his number to recognize him down on the field. I knew his walk and his run, and his posture when he stood on the sidelines. I told my kids, "You could do worse than to grow up and be like Archie Griffin."

I knew Archie Griffin and could identify him from a mile away.

So, one time a few years ago my brother, who is also my insurance agent, invited me to attend the PGA Memorial Golf tournament in Columbus, Ohio, as a guest of one of the insurance companies he represents. After watching the pro golfers work their magic with that little round ball we decided to go to the hospitality tent and have a free sandwich and beverage.

When we got to the tent it was a beehive of activity filled with businesspeople in casual attire visiting and talking and laughing and having a good time. A big-screen television in the corner allowed us to keep track of the tournament action while we ate. The deli spread had obviously been catered directly from heaven.

At length, Brian took me around and introduced me to his business associates and friends and at one point we came to a small cluster of people who were talking about OSU Buckeye football. He introduced me around the circle and then said, as he came to a handsome African American man with a big, warm smile, "And, of course, you know Archie Griffin."

But the fact was, I didn't. I was standing three feet from a man I had nearly idolized for the past twenty years and I did not recognize him when we were up close and personal. I rarely get starstruck, but I have to admit that I nearly was on that occasion. Finally -- mercifully -- Brian rescued me by suggesting he take my picture shaking hands with Archie. I agreed and

then we were off, back to the golf tournament and me finally thinking of all the things I should have asked and said when I had the chance.

When it comes to Christianity, we have to realize that most people who call themselves Christians follow Jesus only in the way I followed Archie Griffin.

They recognize him from a distance. They may even be great fans of his. They appreciate his accomplishments and they like to sit in the fan seats and be close to their favorite Christian. But they have never had an up close and personal experience with Jesus.

They are fans but they are not disciples.

They know, however, that being a fan of Jesus is a largely empty and useless place to be. They know that Jesus has so much more to offer if we are willing to meet him at the up close and personal level. And many of them are hungry to do exactly that but they don't know how.

And that is where we, the church, come in.

It is our role, our job, our calling to provide the opportunities where people can have an up close and personal experience of Jesus Christ and we dare not put less than our very best into this endeavor. We know what people are looking for. And it is not our job to find it for them, but to hold the light so they can find it for themselves.

Some will find it in the preaching, some will find it in the music, some will find it in the fellowship, in the prayers, in mission work, or, in study. Wherever they find it, it is our responsibility to provide them with the opportunity to do so.

Then, one day, they will see and meet the resurrected, living Christ, up close and personal, and they will say to one another, with full hearts, "Christ is truly risen; he is risen, indeed."

AMEN