

HEARTBEATS - Staying Connected

7/9/2021

Dear Friends in Christ,

There are a number of things that have contributed to the slow decline of church attendance going back to the 1960's. It's good for us to at least understand why this is happening, both for gaining insight into what is changing in the church and to challenge us to think about our commitment to the church which is the body of Christ. The impacting factor that I want to talk about here is how choice has affected attendance in worship services.

We have developed into a choice-based society. We expect that we will have choices in nearly everything we do. In the early days of fast food, you could either a hamburger or a cheese burger. Today, you can choose between a variety of items, and not just beef hamburgers. You might want chicken or fish or a veggie burger or a salad, and you can accompany that with a wide selection of drinks, and several options in fries and onion rings. Perhaps you remember the days when there were only three different television broadcast channels. Now, we can pick from literally hundreds of options of stations to watch (though most of us get settled into just a hand-full). A coffee executive, when asked how many possible choices for drinks were available in the store chain for which he works, answered, "Eighty-two thousand, give or take a few dozen!" We are used to having choices in nearly everything we do today.

This has become true when it comes to Sunday mornings. We have gone from having the obligation of going to church to now choosing from a variety of options on how to spend our time on Sunday. You can sleep in late, or go out for breakfast, or just spend a nice morning outside. Perhaps your children or grandchildren have sports or other activities to which you want to go. Sometimes there are tasks that you can finally address. And, of course, there is going to church to worship, but even here, there are many different options of where you can go. Do you want to attend the church that has entertaining musical groups? Or the preacher who really engages your thinking? Or the megachurch where you can be virtually invisible? Or the small church where everybody knows your name? Or the one that has

the great programs for kids? Or, for that matter, you could just stay home and watch church on television.

As I said before, there was a time where church was an obligation. The message often given overtly or subtly was that if you wanted to stay good with God, you'd better get yourself to church. The relationship with God was almost a quid pro quo. "I went to church this week, God, so you have to forgive me." "I gave my offering this week, God, so you have to bless me." "I said my prayers today, God, so you have to love me." It's a good thing that we have reclaimed the message of Jesus that we have a God who loves us unconditionally, but that also has come to mean for many that God will love us even if we don't go to church. But we have failed to fully shift to the important idea that worship is not the thing we do to get God to love us, but that worship is one of the things we do because God loves us. It is our response to what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

We do have many options when it comes to our relationship with God. The choices we make with regard to God and worship says a great deal about our love for God and commitment to God's mission in the world. Worship is one of the important things we can do to continue to grow in our connection to God, but it won't happen unless we make the choice to put God first when considering our options in life. I deeply appreciate everyone who makes that choice to come and receive more of what God has to offer to all and to join with others in worship of God on Sunday mornings.

In Christ's love
Pastor Jeffrey