This is the third message in the series “God of Wonders!” as a part of our Stewardship Campaign 2023.

These messages are based on one of the vows we make when we profess our faith and join a United Methodist Church committing to faithfully participate in its ministries through our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. The main claim of this series is that when we keep this vow by acting on our faith to uphold them, God makes wonderful things happen.

We already talk about what acting on our faith through service and prayer looks like and the wonderful things that happen when doing so. Today’s message is about presence. Presence refers to our commitment to join God in what God is doing. A way to understand presence is with the phrase “showing up.” So, today we are learning how and what wonderful things happen when we show up.

Let’s open with an obvious and commonly asked question: Why attend church? What is the benefit of being a part of a faith community?

Church attendance has been in decline for years. Fewer people attend church every year. Perhaps even some of you have asked the question: Why bother showing up? Why join a church?

The answer is that many people see little value in participating in a faith community and committing to it. Consider this: People protect and make time for the things they value most: jobs, school, sports, entertainment, travel, etc. If they are not making time for church, it is because they may not see the value in being there. They may care about church enough to be there for Christmas, Easter, weddings, and funerals.

What about us? Why do we care about coming together? And, what does it mean to be the church?

Let’s read from the Book of Acts about the early days when the church was just born and see what they did, Acts 2: 1, 43-47,

“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place… Awe came upon everyone because many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

\*If you think of a baby like Amelia Rose, that is how old the church was at the time: a few weeks old.

Here is some context. What is described here took place after Jesus resurrected and told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit to come into their lives so they could be empowered to be witnesses of his teachings to the rest of the world. As we read, they obeyed and were waiting together, “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place…”

Following this, the apostle Peter preached his first sermon to a large crowd; about 3000 people believed and were baptized, becoming part of the church.

Immediately after that, which is happening in this text, we are told how these first Christians practiced their faith: they came together at the temple and their homes to pray, worship, provide for each other’s needs, study the Hebrew Scriptures, and remember the teachings of Jesus. They were glad and generous as they broke bread together and talked about their experiences, memories, and lessons they learned from Jesus and how they saw him go to heaven in the middle of the day.

What brought these people together? It was not particular hobbies, race, language, business, sports, nationalities, or anything else. They did not agree on everything, but they agreed on one thing: Jesus as the Son of God, Lord, and Savior. And because of their faith, the Holy Spirit united them as a family of faith. That is why often we read the language of brothers and sisters in the apostles’ writings. As a family of faith, they learned together, believed together, prayed together, served together, and cared for one another. To them, the church was not a building or a place to go to but a fellowship—people doing life together. They did not go to church; they were the church whenever and wherever they were together. No one was forced to do anything, but they chose to be a part of that community, “And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” Being the church was their choice because they saw the value of it.

Nevertheless, this was not a perfect picture. Over time, some people stopped showing up. Hebrews 10: 24-25 talks about this,

“And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

The writer of the Book of Hebrews is concerned about some people getting discouraged and falling away from the community of faith. So, he said, “provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together.”

Why was meeting together so important that he had to make a point of that? In a previous chapter, Hebrews 5:12, he talked about what we lose when we don’t attend regularly to our spiritual wellness, “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God.” This is tough. He is saying you are still like babies because you neglect your learning by not showing up. Like going back to first grade over and over because you keep missing school.

So, this means that when we don’t show up we miss stuff. We miss the teachings that lead to growth and wisdom that lead to better decisions for ourselves and our families to improve things and build a good life. When we don’t show up, we flunk.

Have you ever heard the phrase, “I wish I had known that when I was younger” or “I wish someone would have taught me that when I was younger.” Many people begin to see the value of the wisdom people tried to share with them when they were younger and regret not listening to it at the time. The same happens to us and our faith. We don’t appreciate what we are missing until years have passed and we have flunked more time that we are willing to admit.

The same is true with our spiritual growth. When we don’t show up we miss experiences and learnings from God that we need to be good people (husband, wife, father, mother, son, daughter, student, worker, neighbor, etc.) and build a good life. But, unfortunately, we don’t know what we are missing until we realize we should know better or have messed up our lives.

How then would we answer the question, “Why do we care about coming together?” Think of it this way: Showing up deepens our roots making us stronger and more fruitful. Just like with any tree or plant, when they keep getting uprooted and moved around, they can’t grow, or worse, they eventually dry up. The same happens to us if we don’t plant ourselves where God calls us to join others in our faith journey. We can’t expect to grow or become fruitful if we let the roots go dry or if we keep uprooting ourselves.

Sometimes we can’t show up for whatever reasons: work, vacations, special events, family time, etc. But when we stop showing up by choice, the roots go weak, we dry up, and when there are strong winds, we break down. That is why we make it a vow so we would remember to take it seriously because vows help us commit and express our love and find ourselves when we lose our way.

The invitation and good news today come from what Jesus said in John 15: 4-5,

“Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”