

Welcome to Back to Church Sunday. If you have come to be here because you were invited by a friend or a member of your family, then be sure to give them a special thanks when you can pull them aside. You see, they cared enough about you to invite you to something that they know will fill your heart and be life giving. They know that this is a place that you need to be, because they understand that it is a place that was made for you.

Thank you for accepting the invitation. You see, the truth is, you came to be here this morning in the same way that all the rest of us came to be here. Maybe your invitation was for this special back to church service, but the others you see here found themselves here in similar ways. Maybe it wasn't a back to church Sunday, but, in some way or another, it was an invitation. It might have been just recently, to a Sunday worship service, or maybe to a social gathering, or to be part of a service project. Maybe their invitation came a long time ago. Maybe they have been sitting in these pews for decades brought here by a friend or family member, a parent or a grandparent. Invitations were made, or family traditions held, because each one of us was loved by someone who knows how much we are each loved by God. So, no matter who it was that thought enough of you to bring you into God's church, whether it was as a child or an adult, we should be grateful.

You see, God made this place for you. It doesn't matter whether you started out in the nursery or this is your first time inside of a church, God made this place for you. And he made you for this place. The theme of this Sunday is, "A Place to Belong." It is a slogan that understands the unfortunate truth that we live in a nation of strangers, and that is not how God intended it to be. It is a theme that says there is a community of people designed for you and the fullness of life can only be found within it.

I like the slogan, for the most part, but, if they would have called me, I might have offered a little tweak to it. I would have made it less place focused and more you focused. It is "A Place YOU Belong." It is a place created for you. A church is not a place to go. It is something to be. It is not an organization of which to be a member. It is an existence for which we were created. We don't go to church. We are the church, a community striving together to be closer to our Creator in order to embrace what that closeness brings.

Let me tell you, or remind you, why we should be part of God's church.

God's church is something that we should be part of because we should be better than we are. We were made to be more than we expect of ourselves and accept for ourselves. We live in a world that is trapped in anger and division, but God calls us to become a people of love and forgiveness. While we are being inundated with voices telling us to pick sides, define enemies,

and destroy each other, God invites us to unite with him to show each other, and the world, a better way. God's church invites us to be better than we are on our own.

We should be part of God's church because God designed each one of us with a purpose beyond just our personal existence. He made you to make a difference. Everyone is gifted. Some are great with numbers and business while others are artists and sculptors. Some are musicians or singers, while others are writers or teachers. Some are care givers, while still others build things. We all are gifted in various ways, and it is only when we come together, as God intended, that the fullness of God's plan for both you and the world can be realized.

And it takes us all. A church full of just accountants and managers runs the risk of missing the beauty of music and the arts. A church filled with only those with the gift of fellowship, might miss the joy of service. A church of just students, might miss the power of teaching and the elation of evangelism. God brings us all to his church with a purpose. You belong here to fill a need in God's mission... to be part of God's church to find and live out your purpose.

And the church itself, the collection of people like you, exists to fulfill its own purpose. To share the Good News of God's plan to bring things back into their proper relationship with God and each other through the love of Christ. To proclaim hope to the world. To provide love and care to those in need. To be a model of God's intention for humanity. The people of God's church, you, us, are gathered to speak and show possibility to the world.

It is like what Mary said. She spoke some very powerful words when she agreed to be part of God's mission for the world. She said, "My soul magnifies the Lord." While most often this is understood as a statement of praise, and surely it is, but it is even more powerful than that. Her existence, her willingness to be part of God's mission, literally magnifies the Lord to, and for, the world. Her participation makes God, not her, more visible. She describes herself as a humble participant taking up her part in showing God as mighty, and holy, and doing great things. She tells of a God who is merciful, and strong, and one who fills those who are hungry. She magnifies the Lord. It is like holding up a big magnifying glass to the presence of God for all to see. We should be part of God's church because our lives can be, should be, a way for others to see and know God.

Everything exists because of God. It says that the Spirit breathed them into existence. God spoke things into being, intending all things to fit perfectly together and to work perfectly together for the fullness of life for all people. When the time was right, he sent his Son in order to provide a way off the path that we chose for ourselves and back into how God made things to be. He sent his Spirit to launch his church and then he called us all to be that church. And, in 1951, he launched this congregation on this hill in this part of Greenville, SC. He brought faithful people to this place because this is where they needed to be. Marriages were celebrated, families were formed, children arrived, baptisms were performed. Life was enhanced and God was magnified. Love was embraced. Lives were changed for the better. And joy was received

and passed on from generation to generation. On and on right up to today. And today God brought you. Whether this is your first time or you have lost count of the number of Sundays you have sat in these pews, God made you for this place and this place for you. This is your place, for this time, to belong to in a way that cannot be found anywhere else. God made you for this place for this time so that he might fill your lives with joy and purpose and love.

And so, this morning I invite us all to embrace, or continue to embrace, the fullness of God's desire for our lives. We may be calling this back to church Sunday, but I can't help thinking that God is calling this, and every Sunday, back to life Sunday, because there is no other place where you can be more fully you.

Amen