

Feast of St. Luke the Physician Sermon

St. Luke/San Lucas 22 October 2023

Sirach 38:1-4,6-10,12-14; Psalm 147:1-7; 2 Timothy 4:5-13; Luke 4:14-21

Blessed Lord, who has caused Holy Scripture to be written for our learning, grant that we may hear, read, learn, and inwardly digest them, that through the comfort of Your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which You have given us in our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.¹

This is our parish feast day, when we celebrate St. Luke the Physician and St. Luke/San Lucas, our parish, our congregation, our church home. As I reflected on this sermon, I began thinking about just what it is that brings us here, to church, to St. Luke/San Lucas, to this building with these people on a typical Pacific Northwest Sunday. Take a minute and reflect, what brings you here today?

When I typed “Why do people go to church?” what I got from the search engines were article after article on why people are *not* coming to church. There are articles about aging congregations, church closures, bi-vocational clergy for those congregations that can’t afford to pay for a full-time pastor.

Clearly, this is a topic of concern, but that’s not what I was asking. Not, why are people staying at home, but rather, what brings people out, Sunday after Sunday, to be in this place, to pray and learn and commune with others. What brings us here, to gather together, to celebrate St. Luke/San Lucas on our feast day.

After searching through the various pages of articles, I finally found some work by the Pew Research Center² on why Americans go to religious services.

To my great disappointment, only 50% of regular church attendees find the sermons valuable. That may be sending a message to those of us who preach about the content of our sermons, and is definitely something we as clergy, as pastors and preachers, need to work on. What we say from the pulpit should be of value, of use, to those who attend. And if only half of the people find it of any use at all, then maybe we need to do some work.

So, if not for the sermons, why do people in America go to church? Reason number four on the list is “for comfort in times of trouble or sorrow.” We see this after times of trauma. Think about the Sunday after 9/11. How many churches were filled to the brim? How many people who had not attended church in years got up to be with others during that time of national and international grief? Churches have been, and remain, places

¹ <https://formsandprayers.com/prayers-meditations/#:~:text=Prayer%20before%20the%20Sermon%E2%80%94&text=we%20pray%20that%20You%20will,even%20as%20You%20have%20promised.>

² Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion>

where we can go when we are hurting. Places of comfort. Places of shared grief. Places of peace.

Reason number three on the list is “to make me a better person.” Wouldn’t that be great, if we could come through the doors of the church, spend an hour or so here, and walk out a better person. More patient. More loving. More generous. More kind. In fact, that is what many of us get from going to church. Encouragement to do the right thing. Assurance that we are not alone in doing something, even though it may be hard. Practical ideas for ways to deal with challenges in a loving way. Support from others as we tackle the challenges of day-to-day life.

The second reason on the list of why Americans attend church regularly is for their children, so that their children will have a moral foundation, so that their children will have a community who cares about them, so that their children will have somewhere and someone to go to in those times of trouble and anxiety that come to us all. 69% of respondents go to church regularly for their kids.

And what is the number one reason that Americans attend church? To become closer to God. We human beings are created with an understanding that we are not alone in this universe, that there is something, someone, out there greater than ourselves. And church is a place where we can go to be in the presence of that Being.

In the busyness of our lives, with all the various obligations and responsibilities pulling us in different directions—family, work, community—it is easy to lose our balance, to become untethered, unmoored. Church is a place where we can go to reset, to spend a bit of time in silence or surrounded by beautiful music, a safe space where we can reach out beyond ourselves to the Creator, to the Redeemer, to the Lover of our Souls. To make contact with the God who loves us, no matter how often we fail at life, no matter how often we lose our temper or act out of selfishness or let fear drive our decisions. No matter how often we are less than we would like to be, God loves us. And in church, we are able to find that moment of calm, that moment of openness, to be reminded of our value, to be reassured of God’s love, to come closer, ever closer, to God.

So ,what does this mean for us, here today, at St. Luke/San Lucas? As we celebrate our parish, our church, we can look at the ways we have met and continue to meet the needs of our community.

We are there for those in sorrow. The celebrations of life and the receptions after that provide the families with time to join together in memories and grief. The healing services. The pastoral care. We at St. Luke/San Lucas support those in sorrow and grief.

We have numerous programs to help make us better people. Sacred Ground and other anti-racism activities. Bible studies. Outreach programs. We at St. Luke/San Lucas actively try to be better people, and help each other in these efforts.

We support parents as they raise up resilient, caring children. With Sunday school and summer camp. With acolyte programs and junior ushers. In handbells and choir.

And here at St. Luke/San Lucas, we create paths for individuals to become closer to God. With worship. With music. With spirituality programs and music offerings. We provide a space, a time, for people to become closer to God.

This community, throughout its history, has done a lot, has been active in all these areas.

The question for today, as we celebrate our parish, is not just what we have done, what we are doing, but even more, what we are going to do in the future.

As we continue our stewardship campaign, as we begin discussing who our next vestry members, our next bishop will be, as we put together our parish budget for the next year, it is easy to get caught up in the practicalities. How are we going to pay for the parking lot? How are we going to meet the needs of an aging congregation? How are we going to pay staff salaries? All these are important issues, and I can assure you that we have serious individuals working and praying about them every single day.

As we take these decisions, on leadership, on resources, on our path forward, I encourage us all to keep in mind the needs of our community. The reasons Americans turn to their church—for comfort in times of sorrow, for support in becoming a better person, for providing love and guidance to our children and our youth, for creating a place where people can become closer to God.

The reassuring news is that God already has this figured out. When we look at our Scriptures, when listen to the words of our texts, we see that what we are searching for is just what God has asked us to do—to bring good news, to spread health over all the earth, to give up our faults and direct our hands rightly, to not leave the suffering alone, to carry out our ministry fully. And to know, in doing this, that we come closer to God.

Amen.