

Why Choose Church?

January 19, 2025 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Mark 12: 28-34

For the next few weeks, our sermons will respond to big questions that have come from you, members of First Church. This week, the question is this: In a time when religious life is diminishing in the US, why choose church?

The question, it seems to me, is simple enough: simple enough to point some deeply profound and personal questions. These days, why would anyone bother with this (*gesture to the gathering*)? Questions of personal conviction aside, there are clearly external reasons for choosing church. You could show up every Sunday for decades of your life motivated on the negative side by family pressures, broader social expectations, or fear. On the positive side, well, the side motivated by reward rather than sanction, you could choose church because it comes with social approval, personal connections, or access to power. While many people have experienced spiritual or personal trauma, including horrific abuse, in church, others are motivated by a whole cloud of ways they personally benefit from church: deep friendships, a sense of affirmation, a feeling of being part of something bigger than yourself, accessing the beauty of music and the awe of space. All of those motivations for choose church are present among us – maybe even all of them are present in each of us. We are mixed bags after all, complicated creatures who do things, even choose church, for complex reasons.

But the question, it seems to me, is asking something different. Not why do people choose church, but given that nearly all of those external or personally beneficial reasons are disappearing among us today, why still choose church? I mean, perhaps you noticed that none of the reasons I just gave actually arise from faith in Jesus, or really arise from a sense of the Divine at all. I mean, you've all seen reruns of Cheers, right? Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name, and they're always glad you came... You can find friendship and affirmation at the bar. You can feel like something bigger than yourself in a group working for indigenous rights. You can access social power in a country club. Well, you get the idea. I don't know if you will appreciate the honesty or worry about the implications, but I'll just publicly say that you don't need church for a whole bunch of reasons that people choose church.

So, what then? These days, when calling yourself Christian is actually a liability, a bit awkward, in most of our social circles, and when all the personally beneficial motivations can be met elsewhere, why choose church?

Well, my response to that question is the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. People should choose church today, these days specifically, because the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. embodied a beautiful moral vision, a moral vision that was inseparable from, although not fully contained in, the Christian faith and the church, a moral vision that reveals the deepest truth about our lives and this cosmos, a moral vision that reveals what we are made for, and thus how to be most fully human.

I'll state the necessary caveat up front: King was not perfect. He cheated on his wife. He allowed his gay friends to be sidelined. He plagiarized the academic work of others. But what I am talking about is not King's personal morality, but the moral vision that arose from his Christian faith.

For King, of course, the Civil Rights Movement was an imperative of his faith. Although he used language that would be accessible to the greatest number of people, King's belief in the equality of everyone, Black, white, Brown, and anything else, the brotherhood of humankind as he often put it, that vision didn't come from the Constitution, or secular human rights, or science, or any place else, other than the heart of God as revealed in Christ. Christ had broken down any dividing wall among humankind, obliterated any possible basis for the subjugation of Black people, and the political problem in America was that it was not embodying the truth about humankind and the world. King said over and over that Americans had to change because a healthy and just nation could not be sustained with a lie at its core. The dream was expressed in the language of the mythology of America, but it arose from the truth of Christ.

As many of you know, there was more to his vision, though. For the sake of strategy, King focused on civil rights for Black people, but from the very beginning of his ministry and public life he was grounded in the human flourishing of all. The crushing burden of poverty, in particular, was central to his message throughout his life. And he was clear that this concern came from his faith. He saw the church as a community of sharing, of mutual burden bearing, and he called on this country, in which at the time at least, most people were nominally Christian, to embody such generous compassion and respect in its treatment of the poor – not simply through social programs, but through social transformation. As King said in 1967:

“A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand, we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.”

Another core expression of King's Jesus-based moral vision was his thoroughgoing rejection of violence, embodied in the non-violent character of his resistance to evil, and in particular, in his opposition to the Vietnam War. King said, “A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.”

In his famous Riverside Church speech in 1967, King sought to explain why he was there at an explicitly anti-war gathering, knowing that his association with the anti-war movement would likely threaten support for the Civil Rights Movement and the Poor People's Campaign. And indeed, that's exactly what happened. Our nation's identity is so steeped in the heroism of war and the myth of redemptive violence, that when King began to speak out against the war in 1967, that's when government harassment reached its peak, and his public approval reached its bottom. Working for Civil Rights apparently we could tolerate, but not a rejection of war. At the time, King noted the explicitly Christian grounding of that work. He said that being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize “is a calling that takes me beyond national allegiances, but even if it were not [so], I would yet have to live with the meaning of my commitment to the ministry of Jesus Christ. To me the relationship of this ministry to the making of peace is so obvious that I sometimes marvel at those who ask me why I'm speaking against the war. Could it be that they do not know that the good news was meant for all men -- for Communist and capitalist, for their children and ours, for black and for white, for revolutionary and conservative? Have they forgotten that my ministry is in obedience to the One who loved his enemies so fully that he

died for them? What then can I say to the Vietcong or to Castro or to Mao as a faithful minister of this One? Can I threaten them with death, or must I not share with them my life?"

He said that if trying to explain his actions throughout his life, it would be most valid "if I simply said that I must be true to my conviction that I share with all men the calling to be a son of the Living God."

I want to make a rather strong claim here. I propose that King's moral vision of racial justice, of economic transformation, and of sacrificial non-violence, including his rejection of war, is not just beautiful and compelling and right – but also it is tied to the very nature of God as revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Without claiming that non-Christians don't have their own access to this truth, we only believe in the beauty and goodness of such a moral vision because it gets at the divine heart of the cosmos. People should choose church because, although we are dreadfully inconsistent at living it, the moral vision at the heart of our faith truly reflects the nature of God. Indeed, given that we are created in the image of God, the moral vision at the heart of our faith also reflects our own true nature, human nature, what we were made for, what is truly inside of us.

In this time when religious life is diminishing in the US, why choose church? We should choose church, they should choose church, everyone should choose church because as followers of Christ we work to perceive, uncover, reveal, and sustain, a moral vision that reflects the true nature of God and our own true nature. People should choose church to discover who we really are. People should choose church because the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., helped us see God.

