

“Do You Have to Belong to a Church to Be a Christian?” Ben Dorr
Ephesians 2:8-10; Matthew 16:13-20 September 20, 2026
17th Sunday after Pentecost Westminster, Greenville

We are continuing our fall sermon series this morning, “Christian Questions with More Than One Answer,” and...just to be transparent, I’m already thinking that I chose the wrong question for today.

You see, as you heard in the announcements, next Sunday is our next New Member class. And Nick tells me that we might have 20 or 30 new members to introduce to you at the 11:15 service next week.

And yet—the question that I decided to preach about one week before that New Member class is this:

“Do you have to belong to a church in order to be a Christian?”

What am I trying to do, plant DOUBT in the minds of all those visitors who would like to join our church?

No, no...that’s not it at all.

Part of the reason why I felt compelled to explore this particular question with you this fall is the ongoing decline in mainline church membership.

I hope everyone realizes how fortunate we are, to have what we have, here at Westminster.

As the professor Ryan Burge recently wrote:

“Forty years ago, someone looking for a new church would have had a range of options available to them. Most...towns had a vibrant Methodist, Episcopal, [Presbyterian], or Lutheran church in the community...At one point, about half of all Americans were part of this moderate, mainline tradition.

“In twenty or thirty years, if current trends continue as predicted, the mainline tradition will largely be extinct across many parts of the United States.”¹

Perhaps some of you have seen this play out in your own family. Maybe you have adult children, children who grew up at Westminster. And now they’re out on their own, and they’re starting their own family, but they’re living in a different community, and they can’t seem to find a church that fits...where they live, the number of churches that are in alignment with the values and beliefs that were instilled in them at Westminster....is ZERO.

It’s not that they don’t want to find a church home.
It’s that they can’t find a church home.

Do you have to belong to a church in order to be a Christian?

Perhaps there’s someone in our pews this morning who, 20 years ago, was wounded by God church. Had a very hurtful experience in God’s church...she decided to take a break from church, and this morning is her very first time back in church in two decades. Who would blame her, for deciding to follow Jesus, but to do so AWAY from God’s church...

Do you have to belong to a church in order to be a Christian?
Clearly, the answer is no.
So why would I even raise the question for our sermon series?

¹ Ryan P. Burge, *The Vanishing Church: How the Hollowing Out of Moderate Congregations Is Hurting Democracy, Faith, and Us*, Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2026.

Let's take another look at our text from Matthew for today.

Jesus asks the disciples:

“But who do you say that I am?”

Peter answers him:

“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

And Jesus responds:

“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church...”

Now...the Greek word Matthew uses for church is *ekklesia*, which literally means “the set apart ones,” or “those who are set apart.”

Is Peter setting himself apart?

No.

Jesus is very clear about this.

“For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.”

Jesus is reminding Peter that Peter's faith in Jesus is not an accomplishment or an achievement.

It's a gift.

A gift that is given to Peter, that sets Peter apart...

not because Peter is so wise or has chosen so well,
but because God has chosen him.

You see, I think we get confused about this choosing business all the time when we talk about church. Our question for today is a perfect example of that confusion!

Do you have to belong to a church in order to be a Christian?

It makes it sound like being part of God's church...is entirely our choice. But according to scripture, nothing could be further from the truth.

Do you remember how Jesus puts it in John's Gospel?
"You did not choose me, but I chose you."

According to our text, your presence here today—
is part of the imagination of Jesus.

So maybe it's not that I'm asking the wrong question.

Maybe we just need to ask some follow up questions.
Maybe question number two goes something like this:

By placing you at Westminster,
by choosing you for this particular faith community,
what is Jesus imagining for you?

As you consider that question, let me offer a few possibilities...

How about FRIENDSHIP?
Have you heard about the loneliness epidemic sweeping through our country?

42% of Americans say that they are lonely every week.

The number of people who say they have no close friend is up fourfold from 1990.

Maybe God's church could do something about that.

I'm thinking right now of two giants of 20th century literature, J.R.R. Tolkien—who wrote *The Lord of the Rings*—and C.S. Lewis, who created the world of Narnia.

A year after Tolkien began teaching at Merton College at Oxford in 1926, he met C.S. Lewis at a faculty meeting. And C.S. Lewis was unimpressed.

In his diary, Lewis described Tolkien as “a smooth...fluent little chap—no harm in him; [he] only needs a smack or so.”

But the two soon discovered that they shared an interest in mythology.

They got to know one another.

“Tolkien decided to show Lewis an early draft of what would become the cornerstone of Middle-earth...Lewis encouraged him to continue mapping out his universe.

“All the while, Lewis was undergoing a crisis of faith. But on a fall evening in 1931, Lewis took a walk with Tolkien—
(because by this time, they had become friends)

...and by dawn Lewis's Christian faith had been revived.

“This rededication sparked Lewis's imagination, and he began to weave Christian themes into his writing. In turn, Lewis pushed Tolkien to bring his fantasy world to life on the page...”

As Tolkien wrote later:

“The unpayable debt that I owe to [Lewis] was not ‘influence’ ...but sheer encouragement...[without] his interest and unceasing eagerness...I should never have brought *The Lord of the Rings* to a conclusion.”²

Do you see what happened there?

Without a friendship between two literary giants who shared a common faith in Christ, there may be no Narnia, no *Screwtape Letters*, no Frodo, no Gandalf, no Sam...

How many of you have ever read the first two chapters of the Bible?

When God created light, and God “saw that the light was good.”
When God created the Earth and the Seas, and “God saw that it was good.”

Over and over, everything that God creates is good.
But then we get to chapter 2.
The first time that God says, “It is not good”...do you know when it happens??

Not when Adam and Eve take a bite of the apple.
It’s when God notices that Adam is alone.

Jesus knew it.

² “How C.S. Lewis Helped Encourage Tolkien’s ‘Lord of the Rings,’ Newsweek Special Edition, March 9, 2017.

In fact, in John's Gospel, he's explicit about this friendship business.

In the 15th chapter, Jesus says to his disciples:

"I do not call you servants any longer...but I have called you friends."

By placing you here, in this particular faith community, what is Jesus imagining for you?

Maybe it's the gift of becoming a new friend to someone you don't know right now...to help carry them through a time of grief, to lift them up when life is pushing them down, to listen to them when they have a story to share.

Speaking of stories, that's another reason I think Jesus may have put you here.

Not only to get to know someone else's story.
But to remember our COMMON story.
Let me get at it like this.

Years ago, the writer and Presbyterian minister, Frederick Buechner, was invited to the Trinity Institute in NY City, to speak to a group of clergy who had come to the conference.

Buechner was the first speaker.
And the second speaker was Dr. Maya Angelou.

Buechner talked about his background, and how "despite having grown up in a family without any interest in...church in particular," he found himself "so drawn to the Christian faith...that [he] enrolled at Union Theological Seminary in [NY City] and was eventually...
ordained as a Presbyterian minister."

After Buechner finished, the same person who introduced him stood up again, and proceeded to introduce Dr. Angelou.

“[You will] now hear,” this man said, “a very different story from the one [you have] just heard from [Fred Buechner].”

Of course, in very obvious ways, this was true.
As Buechner put it:

“She was a woman, and I was a man. She was Black, and I was white....in comparison with her, I had grown up in the lap of luxury, whereas she had been brought up by her grandmother in the rear of the...store [that her grandmother] ran in Stamps, Arkansas, during the worst days of redneck racism.”

But then, as the gentleman was making this introduction, Buechner looked over at Maya Angelou, and much to his surprise, Dr. Angelou was just “shaking her head from side to side.”

The first thing she said when she stood up was:
“No. Frederick Buechner and I have exactly the same story.”³

Now what did she mean by that?
I think you know.

Consider, for a moment, your biggest regret in life.
What’s the worst mistake you ever made in your life?
When you made that mistake, what was God’s response?

Did God punish you?
Did God condemn you?
No.

³ Frederick Buechner, *The Yellow Leaves*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.

The loving-kindness and forgiveness of God—it washed over you.

That's not just your story.
It's our common story.

Or consider, for a moment, the person or people who are most important to you in your life.

How did you come to know that person?
It wasn't fate. It wasn't chance.
It was God.

Whoever you're thinking of...that person is God's gift to you.
It was the grace of the living God that sent this person to you.
And that's not just your story.
It's our common story.

It's a story that reminds us that we don't find God.
God has found you.

And the place where we hear that story each week...is not the gym, and it's not the country club.

It's church.

I recall when the Presbyterian pastor, Scott Black Johnston, wrote about what happened when his father died a number of years ago.

Scott was serving a church in Atlanta at the time.
He went back to the small town of Mora, Minnesota for the funeral.

He describes being in the funeral home,

with his dad laying there in the coffin,
and he's "trying to make small talk" with all these old family
friends.

"My mind was reeling with the kind of crazy mixture of emotions
that being in the presence of a dead loved one seems to bring on," he
writes.

"I wasn't sure whether I could stand being in that space much
longer; and yet, I knew that this is where I had to be."

At that moment, he says, two people walked into the funeral home.

He recognized them...but it took him a moment.
Because they weren't old friends from Minnesota.
They were members of his church in Atlanta.
It was COMPLETELY unexpected.

As Scott puts it:

"God doesn't fax salvation in from some suite in heaven's ritzy
district. God comes. God incarnates. God steps out of grandeur to stand
with us in awkward places at awful times to experience life and death."

Of his two friends who showed up from Atlanta, he says:
"It is impossible to describe the power of that moment."⁴

Have you ever experienced a moment like that in God's church?

You see, I believe you and I are here today because of Jesus.

⁴ As told in a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston, "Save Us," April 5, 2009, at [Save Us | Day 1](#).

I believe you are here because Jesus has SET YOU APART....
for a beautiful and sacred purpose...

Which leads me to my last question.

What chance will you take with your faith,
what risk will you take with your hope,
what cross will you carry with your love...
so that Jesus might do,
some sacred and beautiful thing—
through you?

(Amen.)