Hi,

Today’s updates:

* This Sunday in my 11am class we will be continuing the series, *Living Hope*, for I know we could all use some more hope in these very difficult times. We’ll be talking about the nature of the Christian hope and how we can live that hope every day, how such hope can change how we see ourselves and how we understand the world around us. I hope you will join us [on my Facebook page for ministry](https://www.facebook.com/Scott-Engle-St-Andrew-UMC-110365790736617/?modal=admin_todo_tour).
* The links to my on-line classes, the video recordings of the classes, the class audio podcasts, and the archive of these daily emails can all be found at [www.scottengle.org](http://scottengle.org/scotts-weekly-classes/). All the postings are up-to-date.

As we strive to be a worshipping people in this drawn-out crisis, let’s first take a look at the nature and importance of the church, the family of God. Tomorrow, we’ll consider worship itself.

***Ezekiel 34:11-16 (NRSV)***

**For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.**

***Acts 2:41-47 (NRSV)***

**So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.**

**Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by 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.**

What is a church? Why go? Those are pretty basic questions and you’d surely get a wide variety of answers if you went out on the street and asked a bunch of people those two simple questions. Many people have had wonderful experiences with churches, but many have had just the opposite. Philip Yancey, the well-known Christian writer, talks straightforwardly about his own church upbringing and that he became a Christian despite it. On the jacket of his book, *Soul Survivor*, he writes, “I have spent most of my life in recovery from the Church.” That’s quite a statement from one of the most influential Christian writers of his generation. Given that Yancey speaks for far too many, including some who lost their faith entirely, let’s take a look at those two basic questions.

*What is a church?*

First, a church is not a building. We may use the words that way, but the truth is that a church is a community, a fellowship of believers who may meet in a building or in homes or even on a mountaintop to worship, to pray, to care for one another, and to go about the work given them by Christ. Each church, like the community we call St. Andrew, can be thought of as an outpost or colony of the larger worldwide fellowship of believers called “the Church.”

There are many images of “the Church” in the Bible. It is we who are God’s sheep, protected and cared for by the Good Shepherd. We are also, as Paul puts it, the Body of Christ. We are his eyes and his hands and his feet in this world. We are a fellowship that was formed by God, in the person of his Holy Spirit, and is sustained by that same Spirit. Indeed, Paul refers to us as God’s temple, in whom God’s Spirit dwells. We are, as Peter puts, a “chosen race, a holy nation, . . . God’s own people.” And there is only one thing that we have in common, our faith, i.e., our trust, in Jesus Christ. That faith in Jesus Christ is our one and only badge of membership, not race or gender or geography, nor our obedience to a set of rules nor our conformity to a particular set of doctrines.

*Why Go?*

I sometimes get a question something like this: “I believe in Jesus, but why should I have to go to church? Can’t I love Jesus just as well in my living room?” I understand where the question comes from, particularly in our individualistic society. Frankly, I’m not much of a joiner myself. And I’m pretty pragmatic, wondering what something will do for me. But there is a reason that Bishop Wright writes, “it is as impossible, unnecessary, and undesirable to be a Christian all by yourself as it is to be a newborn baby all by yourself,” for all those who have faith in Christ are born anew, new creations born into God’s creation, the Church. As another wise and informed Christian, whose name escapes me, wrote, “There is no healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship to the Church.” To put it another way, we can’t expect to have a healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship with his Body. And to put a finer edge on the theology, all believers are part of the Body of Christ, whether they are present or absent.

You see, we humans are built for relationship, for community. We are made in the image of God, who is, in his very being, inherently relational, an eternal loving fellowship of three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Thus, it is in community with one another, believer to believer, that we discover the best within us and learn what it really means to have a Good Shepherd.

So, why go to church, why attend even on-line? Because it is there, in the midst of others, that we can find the meaning, the purpose, the joy, and the peace that we all seek.

Is it too much to ask that our churches be such places, that these colonies of God’s new human race, reflect the God whom we worship? In a word, no!

Now, no church will meet all our expectations, nor will any church meet all of God’s expectations. But being absent from church entirely is not an option for a Christian. It is here, in these places and within these communities that we discover the deepest joys of the Christian life.

My wife, Patti, and I came to St. Andrew more than twenty years ago, not long after getting married, and found here the most warm, welcoming, joyful people that either of us had experienced. And we’ve been here ever since, in good times and bad. One son was baptized here, two were married, and we’ve gotten to share the baptisms of our grandchildren and a daughter-in-law with this wonderful congregation of Christians.

But even more important, it has been here that Patti and I have each found our way to a deep, enduring, and fully dimensioned relationship with Jesus Christ. God has used all these wonderful people, both clergy and lay, to reshape us both and we will be eternally grateful. Yes, church matters. We may have to meet on-line for now, but this will pass. Really . . . it will.

‘til tomorrow, grace and peace,

Scott