

Going to church is inconvenient

If you haven't noticed, a lot of people are finding that worship doesn't fit their schedule.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [January 3, 2018](#) issue

A parishioner told me recently that her daughter's family had found the perfect church in Dallas. "They don't go often," she said, "because the church live streams its services. They can watch it anytime. If the kids are playing in the family room or Mom or Dad are busy pulling brunch together, they can have worship on in the background. It's really neat. Have you ever heard of this?"

"Yes," I told her, "I know all about live streaming." My eyes must have reflected a lack of interest because the conversation moved on to other topics.

Emily Dickinson opens one of her poems: "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church— / I keep it, staying at Home." If you haven't noticed, there's a lot of staying at home on Sundays in America these years. For the past couple of generations, researchers have noted that 40 to 45 percent of Americans claim regular weekly church attendance. These days, I'd judge the figure to be more realistically in the 10 percent range. Of the ten lepers healed by Jesus, only one found it worth his time to turn back and express thanks. That one may be the church.

I have decided that making Sabbath worship an integral part of one's life is highly inconvenient. For those who stay away from communal worship because Sunday is the day to arrange personal leisure, take special care of oneself, or get the kids off to soccer, making time for church is just plain inconvenient.

For those of us who make church a priority, Sabbath worship is equally inconvenient, though in a different way. We sing songs we didn't pick, hear scriptures we didn't choose, commit to endeavors for which we must sacrifice, and—here's the worst—sit next to people who aren't even our closest friends.

Those who regularly avoid church often harbor misperceptions about religion and see it as an antique way of life. Plenty of cultural Christians I know seem indifferent

to God and are convinced that the church's priorities are out of line. But in our world of customized living, where a mobile device can effortlessly order up my preferences and bring most everything to my doorstep, church is simply inconvenient. Church pulls me away from my self-designed life and requires that I take some initiative in another world that has nothing in common with "doing whatever I please."

Convenience often feels great, but it's not an unalloyed good. If I exercise only when it's convenient, or buy groceries only at the convenience store, or drink coffee only from paper cups, these choices do not make a good life. Inconveniences can hold their own deep value, especially when they ask us to experience a larger life than the one we typically design around our personal comfort.

We Christians love to talk about Jesus, and with good reason. But it's impossible to have Jesus Christ apart from the church. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's reading of the apostle Paul led him to say that we cannot know Christ apart from Christian community. As wonderful as it might be to have Christ apart from the hypocrisies and distractions of other people who believe, Christ is embedded in the church. Sounds foolish to say, but we are Christ's body. That inconvenient claim, that we are joined to other body parts that don't necessarily think or look like we do, can seem either ugly or beautiful. I find it beautiful.

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