With the Iowa Caucus this past week there was a lot of media devoted to analyzing the minutest detail of the Hawkeye State’s voting public. One of the details that struck me was the growth of a group defined as evangelical but not church attending. There were reasons given for why this group had stopped going to church, including the rise of the internet, the retreat of Americans from social institutions, a conservative population who increasingly see churches as too liberal, and the catch all, Covid. Pushing aside questions about the validity of these reasons, I instead want to reflect on whether you can be a Christian if you have decided that church is unnecessary. In other walks of life, when someone has stopped doing an essential activity of their profession, we refer to them as former or ex. A pilot who no longer flies airplanes, is called a former pilot. And so, is church attendance to a Christian what flying is to a pilot? Is it a necessary part of being a Christian? It is an interesting question especially when we look at in the context of today’s Gospel lesson, which shows a very visible change to individuals who decide to follow Jesus. The passage occurs at the beginning of the ministry of Jesus and reads, “As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people.’ And immediately they left their nets and followed him.”

Now this is about the opposite of those who say they are Christian but do not bother with going to church. Can you imagine if at the point where Jesus asked Simon and Andrew to follow him, they had responded by saying they wanted to follow Jesus, wished him good luck and then happily went back to fishing. For one I am pretty sure the story would not have made it into Mark’s Gospel. And, even if it did, it would probably be held up as an example of what you should not do. In the New Testament, there are no accounts of the twelve disciples sitting at home while Jesus went about his ministry. However, there is a category in the New Testament that does appear to be a little more like these non-church going evangelicals. We hear about it in John’s Gospel, after the crucifixion of Jesus. It reads, “Joseph of Arimathe′a, was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews.” Meaning that, in the New Testament we have disciples who drop everything and follow Jesus and we have others who seem to be much more discreet about it. So, what I would like to do in the next few moments is reflect on what exactly we are supposed to do when we say we are a follower of Jesus and if there is a one size fits all approach. And I realize this is a vast topic so I am going to trim it down and really just focus on the question that I posed originally and that is can you be a Christian without going to church?  But I want to rephrase this question slightly because I think it better addresses the underlying themes presented by the findings in Iowa and that question is why would you not want to go to church if you were a Christian?  That is why would church going be seen as optional for certain individuals and are their reasons valid?

First let me say that there exist valid reasons for why certain Christians do not go to church. Joseph of Arimathea did not follow Jesus publicly because he feared for his life.  Some may object to that excuse, but most of the people objecting appear to still be alive, so you can take that criticism for what you will.  There are other valid issues, like sickness or physical constraints where it is not possible for an individual to go to church.  And there are still other issues such as lack of accessibility to a faith community, like may happen to a lighthouse keeper or prospector in the Yukon.  But baring such excuses as those what about the rest of the population who have access and are physically capable but decide not to go?  Well, I am not saying everyone who does that is going to hell but let me give three reasons why I think church attendance is important and not optional.

First, in a balkanized society like ours, church is one place where you have the chance to encounter real diversity.  What I mean by this is it is very easy to sit on our computer and read or watch only things with which we completely agree.  And this behavior has seeped in Christianity.  I have talked to numerous people who do not go to church because they have found a pastor in somewhere like Driggs, Idaho they really like and, instead of going down the street to church, they watch him on the internet now and then.  But that was never how the church was conceived.  If you have ever wondered why Episcopalians and many others call their church a parish, it is not because those words are synonyms.  Parish means, “the ecclesiastical unit of area committed to one pastor.”  A parish has a geographic boundary. Put another way the idea behind saying parish is that you can drive to it relatively easily.  So, if you live here you really cannot regularly attend a parish in Versailles, Kentucky.  When Jesus describes the kingdom of heaven in Matthew’s Gospel, he says it, “is like a net which was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind.”  The church wants whoever is around in a given area.  I am fairly sure when we get to heaven we will not only be with our favorite internet pastor and the people that tuned into his broadcast on a regular basis but rather the whole communion of saints.

Reason number two.  There is something about a community that is trying to live into God’s will.  If you haven’t noticed, our world has a lot of private morality these days, but Christianity calls us to something greater; it calls us to a morality based on God’s character.  Our society has grown rather comfortable with saying things like adultery and lying are bad when people I don’t like do them, but aren’t so bad when done by someone I like.  Christians are called to live in certain ways and these ways are not determined by what may or may not be good for us at the time. The less we are in a Christian community the more likely we are to cook up our own version of what is right and wrong.

Finally, Jesus tells us to do it. In Matthew 18:20 Jesus says, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” In this passage Jesus is telling us that physical proximity is essential and that we are greater when gathered than we are apart. In the Eucharistic Prayer we say, “Therefore we praise you, joining our voices with Angels and Archangels and with all the company of heaven.” When we come to worship it is not simply that we sit down and receive some information from the priest. Church is not the same thing as going to a lecture on the birds of Southern Wisconsin. There is a mystical union that happens in this time and place that goes beyond just receiving some knowledge. We are joined with God and with all the believers who have come before. If church attendance were simply about listening to some stuff about God, then the internet would be just fine, but Jesus tells us it is more than that, because Church is a place where he is truly present.

So, I must end with the question I started with and that is why would you be a Christian and not want to come to church and I cannot come up with a good reason. Church is not just a nice thing but is rather something that cannot be replicated outside of this sacred space. A space where we encounter one another and where we encounter God so that we may be His own this day and forevermore.