

The Church-Going Habit
*Inspired by a sermon preached by the Rev. George Gordon,
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I want to take a poll about your daily habits. I'll do it with you.

- Raise your hand if you, in general, aim to go to bed around the same time every night.
- Raise your hand if when going to the grocery market, you follow the same paths down the same aisles, selecting--more or less--the same foods.
- Raise your hand if everyday you make room for a bit of exercise.

Alright, good start--let's see if anyone will be honest about these.

- Raise your hand if the first thing you do when you wake up is grab your phone and look at your email.
- Raise your hand if--no matter what, you make your bed everyday.

40% of our daily lives are rooted in habits.

They begin to take root by the age of 9 and for good or for bad, by the time we reach adulthood, we are creatures of habit.

We wake and sleep in routine. We know the meals we enjoy--and when we want to eat them. We are set in the types of book genres we read and Netflix series we watch.

Our habits aren't formed randomly. There is something that triggers our behaviors, and there are rewards or consequences that cause us to want to do it again. According to social scientists: this is a classic habit loop.

It begins with a **cue** which is the trigger that tells your brain to go into automatic mode and let a behavior unfold. The cue is followed by a **routine**, which is the behavior itself. The third step is the **reward**: something that our brains or bodies seem to enjoy that helps to kick off the same **cue** in the future--habitualizing the loop.

Are you with me?

Here's an example: Let's say a certain Associate Minister has a very sweet tooth. And every night on his way home from work, he feels snackish. That's the cue. So he walks three blocks out of his way home to stop by his favorite bakery and buys a single chocolate frosted, vanilla cupcake. That's the behavior. The reward is how good that frosted cupcake tastes and it causes him to do it day after day—even *during Lent*.

Cue, routine, reward, repeat. This is why habits are often so hard, and near impossible, to break. The reward will always drive the loop. The only real hope in breaking the loop is if the loop is somehow totally disrupted.

Two years ago, when COVID-19 barreled into our lives, our habit loops were thrown into disarray. We were forced to change our habits. No longer could we stop by the same coffee shop on our way to work or meet friends for our weekly movie nights. No more soccer practice or dance rehearsals. No more daily commutes or weekly runs to the dry cleaners.

Our routines and customs were disrupted by a new habit loop.

The **cue** was the contagious nature of the virus. The **routine** was staying at home. The **reward** was safety. All of our customs, habits and routines had to change—and change often. Remember quarantining mail and washing groceries?

For good and for bad, we had a chance to rethink old habits and develop new habits. Some of us took more walks, spent more time with our families, and saved some money by eating less cupcakes. And for some of us, we drank too much, slept too late, went without moving our bodies for too long.

COVID-19 left nothing in our lives undisturbed in its wake and that includes the heartbeat of our life together: worship.

For nearly two years, we tuned into worship from our couches, our living rooms, and we wore our pajamas! We watched from our treadmills and pelatons. We listened to the sermons and prayers while we folded laundry and cleaned our kitchens. New habits that proved—relaxing, convenient, efficient.

Across the religious world, experts wondered if this was the new way of worship—of gathering together—if online, virtual church would replace the needs of a physically met congregation. And boy, did we pick up some amazing folks along the way as far flung as Paris and Michigan, Ohio and Texas.

Still over time, this new habit loop didn't stick for all of us. It began to deteriorate.

And you told me why: the **rewards** were no longer there. Without the reward, the cue dissolves, and the behavior ceases. Sure, with virtual worship, we could keep our slippers on, eat a late breakfast and catch up on sorting our mail—but the **rewards** we had come to depend on for so long, had come to delight in—just weren't there.

Rewards unmatched by anything else in the world beyond this place: Singing together, feasting on sweet bread and cup, experiencing the joy and chaos of children dashing up and down the stairs, passing peace with those from different zip codes, with different skin colors, with different ages and orientations, lighting candles, rising, sitting, clapping, moving.

Without the **rewards** gathering for worship so often brought us, the habit loop broke down and attending worship was no longer routine, habitual, regular. Instead it became infrequent, rare, extinct.

What's more, willpower—the source to push us back into routines and habits—is in short supply. Willpower is not about strength and willingness. Instead, willpower, social scientists say, is like fuel in a tank. There is only so much of it in each of us. The more we are forced to make hard decisions, change course, learn something new, the less willpower we have over time.

So for a great many of us, we are out of the church going habit and there's little willpower to get back to it. It's no one's fault. There should be no guilt. The past two years have been a hellish nightmare—filled with twists and turns, daily decisions and disruptions.

Yet, now as the world—and the church—begin to awaken to this new phase we are invited to consider picking up the church going habit again. And for all of the reasons that behavioral scientists have outlined, it's easier said than done. It is a challenge to work this back into our lives.

So we need to ask: Why do it? If it's easier to stay home, easier to stay away, with our Thursday evening/Sunday morning free, easier to not tap into our energy or limited willpower, why pick up the church going habit again?

Well, because **God commands it**. Throughout the bible, God commands the people to worship. Gather. Pray. Baptize. Feast. God commands it. God doesn't ask, doesn't suggest, God commands. And why does God command it? Why does God command this thing that has become so hard to do?

Because we were created for it. We are made better by it. We worship not for God's sake, but for ours. By gathering for worship, we rest and recharge away from the world just a bit, to rehearse the ways we seek to live beyond these walls.

And we gather *together* because the Christian faith is not a solo performance. You cannot do it alone. We are a relational people—bound by promise, a covenant that we belong to one another. And in gathering for worship, we are reminded of that. What's more—it feels good to be with one another. Amen? It feels good to sing with one another. Amen?

By being gathered, by worshiping together, by singing together, we make real the assurance of God that we are not alone.

But perhaps—more than any other reason: we need this church going habit—because our God is worthy of it.

The God who sang the universe into being, who, fashioned our bodies and filled our lungs with song.

The God who opens doors and warms chilled hearts.

The God who sojourned with Moses and Miraim, Harriet and Martin and goes with us still.

The God who declares sin and death defeated by love and life.

That God, our God, is worthy of our highest praise.

Amen?

So get back in the church going habit, church. When you're good and ready. When it's safe for you to do so, challenge yourself, summon the energy, get back in the habit. Not because God depends on it, but because we do. Because it feels good. The rewards are great. And our God deserves it. Amen.

Go forth into the world in peace.

Have courage.

Hold fast that which is good.

Render to no one evil for evil.

Strengthen the fainthearted.

Support the weak.

Help the afflicted.

Honor all people.

Love and serve God,

rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit;

and the blessing of God the Creator,

Christ the Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit,

be among you and remain with you always. Amen