



WHFC Summer
Part 8 – Why We Gather
Pastor Ted Cunningham

We're going to finish out summer today. You need to be really grateful we're an elder led church, not a pastor led church. Whatever that woohoo was all about? I want to see a hand right now. Who just woohooed? Okay, that was a staff member!

There are a lot of lessons we need to learn. We've been talking about this for five months. There are a lot of lessons we need to learn as a church family. Travis Brawner, Doug Goodwin, our elders, we go back and forth on texts a lot during the day. We have fun on those texts, but also... I'll say, "I'm ready to say this..." And I'll get this little text back from Travis that just says, "Not yet." "Not ready for that one." I'll say, "I want to say this..." I'll get, "No." So that is why we are an elder led church, but I've got the freedom today to say something I've been wanting to say for a while now and I'm very excited.

Today, we are talking about *Why We Gather*. We're talking about the gathering. Last week, we hit a record on returns back to our church – 56% of pre-COVID numbers were back on campus. Woohoo, we're celebrating mediocrity. I never thought I would be celebrating 56%. We know about half of our church family is still watching online, but we also know a lot of our church family are not watching at all.

Again, this has been a burden of ours. How do we keep our on campus and online community connected? We want to talk about how important gathering is because I've heard some friends in ministry say... and I don't correct, I don't offer my opinion unless I'm asked for it. That's not true. I often offer my opinion when not asked for it. But when I hear a pastor say these words, "We don't need to meet," I always want to cringe a bit. There's a better way to say it. I know what they're trying to say. I even heard one on a cable news network say, "We're the church, we're always open; we don't need to meet." I think a better way to say that would be, "We need to meet; we just can't." I know a lot of churches aren't able to meet right now. But we don't want to put the lesson out there or the teaching out there that gathering as the family of God is not important because it is. Gathering as the family of God, as the body of Christ is so important.

When we read in Acts 2... You know I come back to Acts 2: 42-47 often because it's this beautiful picture of the body of Christ, of the family of God. It's the church launching. It's the first century church. **Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts and then in homes.** This is our strategy moving forward as a church, meeting here in a large group, meeting in homes, and in a little bit, I want to encourage and challenge all of us to even start meeting in driveways and garages. **They ate together with glad and sincere hearts.** The Baptists would say the Hebrew for this is potluck. But they met together.

When you go from Acts 2 to Acts 5, you see the persecution of the first century church. In Acts 5, we read that the apostles are told... you would even call it a ban. They were given a ban on speaking the name of Jesus. Do you remember from Acts 5? They were flogged and sent out. And they actually counted it joy that they were able to be flogged for their Savior, to participate in his sufferings. And guess what? They continued to proclaim the good name of Jesus no matter what. As we read Acts 5, just three chapters later. ***42 Day after day...*** After they were told to no longer speak of his name. "Don't spread his name around this city." ***...in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.***

If you have your bibles, turn to Hebrews 10. We want to spend some time in Verses 23-25, and we want to look at how important it is and why you and I need to be gathering. Online, in our debrief from 8:30, I asked multiple times. I know what the content is, but tone. I have been praying for my tone during this time because there are so many different groups that we need to talk to as we talk about everyone in here and everyone online, taking a step, one step toward regathering.

We want to look at four observations, four lessons from Hebrews 10: 23-25. I think what I have taken out of this text most this week that I love, and it reminds me of why we gather as a church more than anything because we are a future-focus church. We are living in uncertain times, but we know who holds the future. We live in uncertain times, and you'll here it said multiple times from up here. We know how the story ends. As the hymn writers gave us for centuries, we keep an eye here on earth, but always have one eye fixed on heaven. We know where we're going, we know what's been promised. You have to go back 2,000 years to the first century church. Jesus died, he rose again, he ascended to be with the Father. Before he went to be with the Father, he said, "I'm coming back. I'm coming again." You need to be encouraging one another with these words. And we are going to see that today in Hebrews 10.

Before we jump in, I just want to share with you briefly something from Eugene Peterson, a pastor of almost 50 years here in the U.S. before he went to be with the Lord. He just paints this beautiful picture in one of his later books about the Jesus way. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." He says sometimes churches like to take pieces of that, but they all three go together. The Jesus way proclaiming that Jesus truth leads to the Jesus life. He said sometimes churches get really caught up with the Jesus truth, but they don't live the Jesus way, which means they are not fully experiencing the Jesus life. What I love about Eugene Peterson, which sometimes gets lost in our modern Christian writings, is his passion for the local church, his passion for the local congregation.

In his book, he says, *A Christian congregation, the church in your neighborhood, has always been the primary location for getting this way and truth and life of Jesus believed and embodied in the places, and among the people, with whom we most have to do day in and day out. There is more to the church than this local congregation. There is the church continuous...*

It's not just the local congregation, it's men and women that have gone before us. It's men and women that we're connected to around the world through prayer, through suffering, through missions. *There is the church invisible, dimensions and instances of the Spirit's work that we know nothing about.*

Hebrews 12 also speaks of the great cloud of witnesses and sometimes we get caught up in big C, but what I love about Eugene Peterson is that he always brings it back down to the local congregation, the gathering of believers in a community. He says, *But the local congregation is the place where we get all of this integrated and practiced in the immediate circumstances and among the men, women, and children we live with. This is where it becomes local and personal.*

The local congregation is the place and community for listening to and obeying Christ's commands, for inviting people to consider and respond to Jesus' invitation, "Follow me," a place and community for worshipping God. It is the place and community where we are baptized into a Trinitarian identity and go on to mature "to the measure of the full stature of Christ" (Eph. 4:13), where we can be taught the Scriptures and learn to discern the ways that we follow Jesus, the Way. It's his life, his way, and it's the truth.

The local congregation is the primary place for dealing with the particulars and people we live with. A Christian congregation is a company of praying men and women who gather, usually on Sundays, for worship, who then go into the world as salt and light. When we gather as a family, we gather to worship together, to grow together, to learn together, to invite others to join us and to serve one another.

Let's read Hebrews 10 together and then break it down into four reasons why we need to be gathering as a family. Hebrews 10 – **23 Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess...** And this hope is future, the future promises that we know have been made to us. **...for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, 25 not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing...** And today we want to talk about the habit of gathering and the habit of gathering that some have walked away from. **...but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.**

1. Our gatherings keep us on course. Your faith and this family are connected. You are not meant to be an island. I hear from people from time to time, "I don't need the church." I often hear this in the Ozarks, "For me, church is just going out by myself and sitting on my dock." That's great. I think that's important to spend some time alone, but then gather with the church family because here's the thing. It's not just about you. When we gather, it keeps us on course as we looked at it last week. Turn your eyes on Jesus. Fix your eyes on Jesus. We know when we gather and we sing and we learn and we teach and we proclaim, our eyes are fixed on Jesus and we're moving forward.

Pastor Rex, one of our care pastors here, said it this week and it just stuck with me. I've been thinking about it all week. If your eyes are fixed on Jesus and you are on course and you're moving forward, if you make one slight turn, I mean just a little, and start walking... Well right here, it's still feels like you're on course, but go a mile out and you're a mile away." I'm not a geometry expert so I don't know if what I just told you is true, but you get the point. It starts off small, just a small taking your eyes off. When we gather, it keeps us on course; we are reminded of the commitment that we made.

This is why when we read Paul's letters, you always get this, "Here's how you started. You need to go back to how you started. You need to go back to when your faith was brand new and all you could think

about was the Lord.” That is why we gather. We gather to reprioritize our lives, to refocus our minds and our hearts on Jesus.

This week, I was asked to go visit Larry from our church who was placed on hospice care. I went to Point Royale, I walked into his home, and met his family gathered around his bed. It was like I always do, not just on hospice visits, but anytime I’m in the hospital and I don’t know a person all that well... And I didn’t know Larry all that well. I do now and I’m praying for you, Larry, and I’m praying for your family. It was just this moment of before we pray... I asked, “How do you want me to pray? Because I know how to pray for peace and comfort and all of that, but Larry, before I pray, I’m going to ask you the question of have you placed faith in Jesus? Have you trusted Jesus as you’re Lord and Savior? Have you confessed your sin, removed yourself...” You know preachers have to ask the question a lot of different ways to make sure.

Larry wouldn’t let me get the question out before he answered with a loud and clear “YES!” Okay, I’m going to ask it a couple of different ways to make sure the answer is still yes. Why? Because I ask the question often and it’s met with, “I sure hope so.” It’s also met with “I hope the good Lord let’s me in.” It’s met with, “I hope he knows I’m a good guy.” No, have you placed faith alone in Christ alone? Have you trusted Jesus as your savior? For by grace you are saved through faith. It’s not of works so that you cannot boast about it. Keeping your eyes fixed.

The scripture says in Hebrews, ***23 Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess...*** This is confidence in the expectation of the future. Larry, I want you to know heaven is your home. I want you to leave this earth with confidence, with clarity. Remember what Rene taught us this summer. We’re not going to get certainty, but we can have clarity. We’re not going to get certainty right now. As Adam taught us, we don’t know. You’re going to ask a lot of questions that are going to be responded with, “We don’t know.” “I don’t know.” “Have no clue.” But what we can answer with is clarity and confidence because our eyes are fixed on the Lord. He is unchanging, the same yesterday, today, and forever.

2. Our gatherings remind us of God’s promises. The scripture says, “He who promised is...” The confidence we have in the future, the promises that he’s made, “I’m going away, I’m preparing a place for you, and I’m going to come back and get you.”

Let’s look at these promises. This is what I love about gathering. Just a few of them straight from scripture and some of you need to be reminded this morning of these promises. His love endures forever. His faithfulness continues through all generation. We sang about that today. He gives strength to the weary. He’s near to all who call on him. He is faithful and just and forgives us of our sins if we ask. He gives good gifts to those who ask him. Jesus said, “Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” He promises us rest. He said, “I have come that they might have life and abundant life.” This is a promise that has been given to us. “Anyone who believes in me will live even though they die.” “Whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” We’re promised this. We can rest in this. So, if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed. Jesus said, “I go and I prepare a place for you. I will come back and take you to be with me so there you may be with me.”

This is why if you come to a funeral at Woodland Hills, you're getting 1 Thessalonians 4 where Paul reminds them that we mourn with hope. We are always mourning with hope. We're not ignorant about those who fall asleep or those who die. We believe Jesus died and he rose again and he's coming again. And what does it say at the end of 1 Thessalonians 4? "Encourage one another with these words." We are to be reminding each other of these words.

3. Our gatherings help us encourage one another. We've got to be together. We need the encouragement. Sitting on your dock as you have quiet time and you're alone, that is good; that's a good spiritual discipline, but I'm here to tell you that you need more. You need the body of Christ around you. You need the family of God speaking life over you.

We read... and this is the largest part of the text. ***24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds...*** The idea here is stir up. When I thought about it this week... If you're on any sort of social media, you already know how to stir up people. It doesn't take anything. I had a buddy that texted me this week. He goes, "Man, I want to share so much of what you post, but my wife won't let me." I don't know what that's saying about me or Amy, that she's letting me post it because there are so many things. Sometimes I have to take it by Amy, "Is this going to stir people up to be divisive? Is this going to stir people up to get all worked up?" Some of you have shared posts that I've done and 20 minutes later I delete it because it was already stirring it up.

What if we woke up tomorrow and all Facebook was was encouraging one another toward love and good deeds. We would think it must be owned by a republican now because... NO. Or a democrat or a libertarian, or whatever. We get toxicity during this season. We do. And by the way, one more person sends me something to watch before it's deleted, I'm going to stab myself in the neck with a fork. I ain't doin' it no more. We have to calm it down.

But we should be speaking to one another, encouraging one another. The word here is *exhorting with the truth*. We are to remind one another of the promises of God. Now, I want us to balance this with what we talked about last week. Many of you would send me texts this week and say, "Hey, before I hit send on this to a family member, is this toxic positivity? I go, "No, I think you're good." "Can I add verse to it?" Yeah, I'm not saying we stop quoting verses to people, but we don't do it in a way that it's just a walk-away, trite, I don't have time for you. We don't turn verses into, "I'll pray for you" when we really won't.

I had a friend from church call this week. The family is going through something from a couple of years ago. I can't share the story with you, but it's terrible. It didn't happen here in this area. We said don't ever say it could be worse... With what he was sharing with me, it doesn't get worse. There is no worse. He said, "Ted, I have one emotion. And you don't know me well enough to know this yet, but I have one emotion and that emotion is happy. All I ever am is happy. My family will ask me... They don't ask me about my emotions, they ask me about my emotion. I don't have more... that's it." He goes, "I've spent so much of my life wanting people to enter in and feel what I'm feeling that I don't ever really go where they are. This family member who is going through something tragic called me. I'm on the couch and my wife is sitting next to me and all I was saying... I was just repeating all those talking points at the end of the message. I'm here for you. If there's anything I can do. What you're going through is difficult."

Establish that type of relationship and that rapport and then share the promises of God. Encourage one another. Stir one another up. We know how to stir one another up to division and divisiveness. Just talk about this for a little bit (face mask). I asked a couple people this week, "I wasn't old enough when seatbelt laws came out, but was everybody as frustrated with seatbelt laws as they are with the mask?" All the seniors are going, "Yeah! I still don't wear mine." Okay, good, alright. We know how to do that. But what does it say? ***25 not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing...*** And most believed many were retreating, you could say deserting or defecting from the meeting because of persecution, because of fear of what's going to happen if this ban has been placed on them to not speak the name of Jesus. ***...but encouraging one another.***

4. Our gatherings fill us with hope for the return of Christ. This is why I love our anthems. It's why I love when we sing about the return of Christ, the gospel, all the way through. ***...and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*** What is this saying, church? We should be meeting more, not less as we anticipate the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. This should be a priority for us.

So, with that said, there are some practical ways... We want to try and talk to everyone today, but I really need to spend a lot of the time talking to those watching right now, live, and many who will be watching on demand later. This was really weird to do at 8:30 because we weren't broadcasting anything. But we took them along for the ride and now we're here.

So, a friend of mine, Matt Engle, works in Boulder, Colorado. He is a researcher. He spends all of his time with data. He's put all of his energy into the local church. He works with churches all over the country. I've known Matt for about 10 years. He just did a big study with Barna, Gloo, and Carey Neuhoff. I asked him to just give me the bullet points of what's going on with people who are not yet returning to campus. He said it breaks down into thirds. I'm thinking today there may be 1,100; we may be at 58%. We're breaking records at record pace. But we still have about 1,000 of you that have not made it back to campus for a lot of different reasons.

This is where I've asked the Lord to guard my heart and my mind and my tongue. Post a guard at my mouth as we share this. But this is what Matt shared with me from the data. This is nationwide, the U.S., so it's not just Branson and not just Missouri, but this is across all churches, all denominations, all sizes around the U.S.

About 1/3 of people who have not yet returned to campus are streaming only their church. They still want to be connected. So, there are a lot of you with underlying health conditions, a lot watching this morning who actually have symptoms. We have many in our church family sick with COVID right now. We are honoring decisions for safety and for those who just feel it's too risky for them to return. It's not really the group we need to talk to today.

He said another 1/3... I edited what he said and I'm going to put the word in now because I feel like I shouldn't have edited what he sent me. 1/3 are streaming their church and shopping others. They are trying to decide where they are going to go when they do go back to church. I know many are watching our church today after they watch their church. Many of you have stopped watching your church and you're watching our church.

Some of you, it's from around the country, others will be watching later, even in our community. I want to encourage you to find a gathering in your community, a place where you can serve, a place where you can invite, a place where you can give, all of this done through the local assembly of the family of God, the local gathering.

And then this one. This is a hard one for us to work with but, 1/3 have stopped watching altogether since Easter. We are trying to figure out how we minister to all of these people, minister to you. We never staffed our church, we never set up volunteers and structures and programs and all of that based on all of this that we are talking about, so we're kind of building the plane in the air, I think is the illustration that you would use and some of you love and some of you hate.

So, here's what we're going to do. We're going to talk to every person in the room and every person watching online right now. **Everyone needs to take a step toward gathering in this season.** We're going to invite you to take one step toward regathering. Starting with this group. If you're watching on demand whenever you get around to it or whenever it's convenient or when you're getting ready in the morning and you just have it there doing your hair and all of that, gather with your family and set a time and place. Tell your family... If work is an issue and you're not available on Sunday morning and you're watching on demand right now, I want to encourage you to say, "7:00 Sunday night is your family gathering. You're all watching individually, that's a step toward gathering. We are now going to watch it as a family."

If you are watching on demand, gather your family with us online next Sunday at 10:00am. Take a step toward church at home. I just want to encourage you. This is a big one, but I think it's overlooked. Take a shower next Sunday. That's a step. Get dressed; do your hair. Just take one step toward gathering and just tell the family this week, "We're meeting in the family room at 10:00am."

If you're watching with us live at 10:00am on Sundays as many of you are right now and I'd love to see the comments on Facebook right now. Stirring up toward love and good deeds. No negative stirring up. **Engage online and encourage believers right now.** Phone calls, texts, engage during the service. We want to give you the freedom. Do you know someone that's not here that needs a word of encouragement? Take the time to encourage them.

This one... We're flying through these I know. **If you have underlying health conditions and can't attend...** We understand that. We're not telling you to regather if this is not safe for you. Most who have come back have said they have felt safe here. **...engage with your church family in new ways. Ask some folks over this week to meet in your garage or driveway. Start a home group. Join a home group.**

So, ask some folks over this week to meet in your garage or driveway. We're starting #lawnchairministry. It launches today. It's nothing really fancy. Just get your lawn chairs and put them in the trunk. Call somebody this week. You may be watching right now saying, "I'd love somebody to stop by." We'll try to connect you the best we can, but just go sit 20 feet apart.

I went all over town looking for those old fashion lawn chairs with webbing and aluminum... they don't make those anymore. So, these won't last forever, but hopefully, neither will COVID.

Put lawn chairs in for your... I'm going to have these two... Not these two chairs. I'm giving these two chairs away in the 11:30 so come to 11:30 if you need chairs to get this started. Nobody gets them in here because I have one more service. But I'm going to carry lawn chairs around; I've got a cooler that's always full in my truck. Just stop for 15 to 20 minutes. Find somebody, call somebody #lawnchairministry. Start encouraging people in the church. I think this could be one of the simplest ways for us to reconnect our online and on campus community.

Start a home group. Join a home group. We want you to plug into a gathering. Cathy Jensen, our discipleship director has said we need leaders for home groups. It's time for many of you to step up and do this. So, start one or join one.

If you do not have underlying health conditions and you feel safe at Walmart, Menards, Applebee's, the Pour House, The landing, or Bass Pro, join us on campus next Sunday at 8:30, 10:00, or 11:30. Set a date to return.

I get it. Right now, we are moving into the level of commitment... I heard it this week and it made so much sense to me. If church is the only thing you are quarantining from, you're doing it wrong. This is of value and this is important. It's important for your faith. I work with couples all the time who start to make bad decisions for their marriage. And those bad decisions lead them to disconnecting from the community, the family of God. We haven't seen them for a while. It's because they've made decisions for their life, for their marriage, for their family that they don't want to hear from other believers who want to encourage them and encourage the commitment they've made. You need the gathering.

I just want to encourage you. Some of you don't want to have to get up and be bothered with is. This is worth it. It is worth it. We have people spread out outside in Adirondack chairs. It was full at 10:00 when I just walked by. I've been told the Chapel is full. I don't know if we've had to turn folks away, but we encourage you to meet back.

For those of you online and in the room, **if you are attending on campus gathering, but not serving, find your place of service and encourage other believers.** If you've been concerned over the last couple of weeks about the mental health of children, there's something you can do about that, something very practical. There is a step you can take for the mental health of children and I'll say beyond the mental health of children to the spiritual health of children. You can serve in family ministries here at our church. You can encourage kids right now, during this time of not knowing how long they're going to be back at school and if they are going to be sent home for two weeks or they are going to have to shut down for the rest of the semester. You have a very practical way of doing that.

I just want to encourage you. Start simple with lawn chairs this week. Go meet with somebody, encourage someone from our church family. Call them today and schedule it. If you're not part of a home group, get in a home group. If you're a part of a home group and feel you need to start another one so you can start serving, we need some seasoned believers in this church to start serving other

believers. Some of you it may be just like Al and Glenda who I see every week and all the other faithful hospitality... By the way, I just want to encourage all of our church family. Our hospitality team is doing a fantastic job with the restrictions that they've been given and they are doing their best and I want to say thank you for the way you've been treating them because I know a lot of you work out and about in town and you're trying to help people work through the restrictions and all of that and you're not being met with kindness, grace, love, on any level. Thank you for treating the hospitality team that way here at our church. Many of you need to make that a place of service. Home groups, hospitality, children's ministry, some of you will be in the parking lot next week. Go on the app and find your place of service. We gather together as a family to encourage one another. We need this. Something may happen months down the road where we are told we can't meet again. Whatever happens, meeting is important, gathering is important for your faith and for your family.

Father, it's in the name of Jesus that we thank you for our time this morning. I pray for all of those online right now watching, all of those that are watching on demand later on in the week, that they would just rest with this passage today in Hebrew 10: 23-25, that they would rest in it. And that if they have any resistance to it, that before posting about it or sharing it with another person, that they would spend some time with you, discussing the importance of your family and being a part of your family and connecting to your family and staying connected to your family, serving with the family, worshiping with the family, inviting others to be a part of your family.

May Woodland Hills, through this uncertain time, always prioritize everything we've talked about today: the promises of God that come through in our lives. May we remind one another and leave here today, finding creative ways as a church family to stir one another up toward love and good deeds.

For the one who has never placed faith in Jesus, that today would be the day they take themselves off the throne of their lives, quit making it about them, because it's not about their way; their way leads to destruction, but they would repent of their sin and trust Jesus as their savior, I pray that decision would be made today.

We pray all of this in the name of Jesus and everyone agreed and said... Amen.