

I Don't Worship God by Singing. I Connect With Him Elsewhere.

Donald Miller

I've a confession. I don't connect with God by singing to Him. Not at all.

I know I'm nearly alone in this but it's true. I was finally able to admit this recently when I attended a church service that had, perhaps, the most talented worship team I've ever heard. I loved the music. But I loved it more for the music than the worship. As far as connecting with God goes, I wasn't feeling much of anything.

I used to feel guilty about this but to be honest, I experience an intimacy with God I consider strong and healthy.

It's just that I don't experience that intimacy in a traditional worship service. In fact, I can count on one hand the number of sermons I actually remember. So to be brutally honest, I don't learn much about God hearing a sermon and I don't connect with him by singing songs to him. So, like most men, a traditional church service can be somewhat long and difficult to get through.

I'm fine with this, though. I've studied psychology and education reform long enough to know a traditional lecture isn't for everybody. There's an entire demographic of people who have to learn by doing, not by hearing. So you can lecture to them all day and they're simply not going to get it.

Research suggest there are three learning styles, auditory (hearing) visual (seeing) and kinesthetic (doing) and I'm a kinesthetic learner. Of course churches have all kinds of ways for you to engage God including many kinesthetic opportunities including mission trips and so forth, but if you want to attend a "service" every Sunday, you best be an auditory learner. There's not much out there for kinesthetic or visual learners.

Interestingly, I learn a great deal by teaching, which is interesting to me.

I learn by doing the very thing I don't learn by hearing! My guess is because teaching is a kinesthetic discipline rather than an auditory discipline. But that's a side note. Here's the real question:

How do I find intimacy with God if not through a traditional church model?

The answer came to me recently and it was a freeing revelation. I connect with God by working. I literally feel an intimacy with God when I build my company. I know it sounds crazy, but I believe God gave me my mission and my team and I feel closest to him when I've got my hand on the plow. It's thrilling and I couldn't be more grateful he's given me an outlet through which I can both serve and connect with him.

My friend Bob Goff says when we study somebody without getting to know them, it's called stalking. Bob says Jesus is getting creeped out that we keep stalking him. He'd like us to bond with him in the doing.

So, do I attend church? Not often, to be honest.

Like I said, it's not how I learn.

But I also believe the church is all around us, not to be confined by a specific tribe.

I'm fine with where I've landed and finally experiencing some forward momentum in my faith. I worship God every day through my work. It's a blast.

So are you an auditory, visual or kinesthetic learner? And if visual or kinesthetic, how do you connect with God?

Why We Don't Just Need Community, We Need Church

Caryn Rivadeneira

These are the holiest places I know: the Eagle Trail, in Peninsula State Park, Ephraim, Wisconsin; the woods that wind around a creek near my house; our town's public library, the Art Institute of Chicago.

I've been so overwhelmed by the presence of God in these places that I've nearly fallen to my knees, kissed the holy ground in each of them. Mostly, I offer a mental genuflect or lift my arms away from my sides, turn my palms toward heaven and think thanks to the God of woods and water and books and paintings. Of the God who offers us his creation and who lets us create alongside him.

Which is why I often get dizzy with the Spirit while sitting at my laptop cranking out an article or a chapter or a proposal. I hear God when laughing with colleagues, when brainstorming ideas. Work is worship for me. Always has been. Lord-willing, always will be.

I tell you this because when I read Donald Miller's recent piece *I Don't Worship God by Singing. I Connect With Him Elsewhere*, though I could hear the backlash a-comin' for him, I got it. I knew exactly what he meant: that he worships best through work, that he connects to God in nature.

And yet, I'm super pro-church. Pro-"Every Sunday Butt in Pews" Church. Pro-"Sing Beside Folks Who've Hurt You And Are Hurting" Church. Partly because Jesus made collective worship his "custom," as our pastor recently reminded us. Partly because although my bones may not feel like going to church many Sundays, church offers something nowhere else can: not the woods, not the library, not the sheer cliffs on the trail above Nicolet Bay, not even the Art Institute. A Sunday morning at church offers what a Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte cannot. Well, not completely.

In libraries and parks and museums, I can marvel at our Creator; I can shiver at his goodness; I can beat out my laments in angry stomps along trails; I can get lost in the created images and words and catch glimpses of *Imago Dei* along the way. I can worship; I can feel; I can ask. I can learn.

But not like I can in church.

Miller begins with a confession that he doesn't "connect with God by singing to Him. Not at all." Fair enough. But here's my confession: Singing has always been my favorite part of church not because we're singing to God, but because we sing with one another, for God.

When we sing in church, we join voices—all of us, the happy, the sad, the rich, the broke, the healthy, the sick, the faithful, the doubters, the straight-and-narrow-ers, the wanderers, the popular, the lonely—and profess words we'd never otherwise say together.

I connect to God in the moment I catch the tear-filled eyes of the impeccably dressed older woman as she sings "prone to wander, Lord I feel it," and I know I don't wander alone in this place. I connect to God in the terrible voice I hear and in the hands I see raised in praise from the man who's battled so much. And I know I don't struggle alone here—and can still find a way to praise.

We may not always feel connected to God singing to him, but it's when we come to church we can sing—or listen or learn recite or pray or take communion or pass peace—about what God has done, who God is, what we believe he will do like no place else. And when we do it together, we connect to the Body of Christ, we join with the *Imago Dei*. And we connect to God. Like no place else.

We're Not the Bouncers

Marlena Graves

Central to this conversation over attending traditional church services is the question of what constitutes church and Christian community. Is church where two or three are gathered together in Jesus's name (Matt. 18:20)? If we believe in the priesthood of all believers, then why are ordained pastors/priests necessary for the preaching and hearing of the word, baptism, communion, and other worship experiences? Why can't we do church with our friends and other like-minded people?

Over the years, I've had conversations with people who, like Donald Miller, no longer attend traditional church services and prefer to gather with Christian community on their own. A number have left because of dreadful experiences at the hands of church members and leaders. Others have stopped attending for reasons similar to Miller's (reasons explained in two blog posts earlier this month). They point out that they've not given up gathering together; they've only given up gathering for traditional worship services.

Sadly, not all churches and Christian environments produce disciples who resemble Jesus. Indeed, some are soul-killing and soul-wilting environments – bad soil. Remaining in them may lead to the spiritual suicide Denny Burk worries about in a much-read response to Miller's confession. So, people flee these environments to save their faith. Maybe they do something akin to Miller.

I don't think it's wrong that they take time away to recover. In fact, a temporary leave of absence may be their best shot at recovery. We dare not harangue them or berate them for taking time out. Instead we are to be a good and listening friend—a healing presence. Some have a form of PTSD when it comes to attendance at a traditional church. Nagging them or manipulating them with guilt in an effort to get them to attend church will only further alienate them. Still I think wisdom encourages an eventual return to a more healthy "traditional" church (as Miller calls it) should they be ready to return.

Here's why: the only way you and I can learn to love deeply is to be loved in healthy ways and to learn to love those who are different than we are—including those who get on our nerves. Love is often inconvenient. We don't get to be the bouncers at the traditional church service doors, turning people away and picking only our friends to be our community. And because we're not the bouncers, there will be people near us who challenge our love skill sets.

I worry that Miller's model is too exclusive—too self-selecting. While it's important to have like-minded friends and colleagues, we must also interact closely with those unlike us, those who may irk us, if we are ever to learn to love the way Jesus would have us love. It is imperative that we contribute to everyone's flourishing, including the irksome and the hurtful that behave as our enemies. It's not easily done, and may take a long time, but it is what Jesus calls us to do. While giving and receiving love is often joyous, learning to love often requires that we experience frustration. (Here I am not advocating subjecting ourselves to spiritual, emotional, physical, or sexual abuse—in that case, please flee to a safe place.)

Being in a traditional service can grow our ability to love, but just as importantly, it can teach us to receive love from those who aren't like-minded. Hopefully, as we become more hospitable to and learn to receive hospitality from those who differ from us we'll be surprised at how and in whom Jesus Christ shows up. God forbid we accidentally bounce Jesus out at the door.