

Sermon Series: The Great Ends of the Church
Sermon #3: “The Maintenance of Divine Worship”
Psalm 100: 1 – 5

The Bible that is on the pulpit today has an interesting history. This is not the Bible that usually rests here. This is actually a Bible that was given to me by my late grandmother, Eloise Hendricks. In 1895, my grandmother’s family donated this Bible to be the pulpit Bible for the Bethesda Church of the Brethren in Williams County, Ohio. For many years this Bible was used in that little rural church where my ancestors worshipped. Then, as many small country churches do, Bethesda closed its doors and ceased to exist. They gave the Bible back to the family, to my great-grandparents. In turn, my great-grandparents donated the Bible to another Church of the Brethren, Walnut Grove, which they joined when Bethesda no longer existed. Again the Bible was used in the church for decades, until that church, too, closed its doors. And once again, the Bible was given back to the family, this time to my grandmother, who kept it until she passed it on to me. This Bible is 112 years old, and for most of its life, it has been used by the church in worship.

I would have loved to have seen the two little churches where this Bible dwelt. I can imagine the countless faithful folk who gathered to worship each Sunday morning. Among them were members of my own family, people who in their own time and place, worshipped the same God that I worship today. People who prayed familiar prayers, who sang some of the same hymns, who read and heard the same passages of scripture, who surely recited the Lord’s Prayer and the Apostles’ Creed, just as we do today.

Though I never met my great-grandparents or any of those who came before me, we are linked by our common worship, and by our love of the same God.

In this church, there also were faithful people who sat in these pews and sang and prayed and praised just as we do today. There are some here today who are actual descendants of those original church members, but whether or not we are related, we are the spiritual descendants of those who came before us. And there are elements of our worship that we share with them and that we should maintain and pass on to those who will come after us.

This is the third sermon in our series on the Great Ends of the Church. The Great Ends of the Church is the mission statement for the Presbyterian Church. These six statements, found in our Book of Order, tell us what we as the church should be accomplishing. The first of the Great Ends was the proclamation of the gospel. On that Sunday we talked about sharing our faith with others as we follow Jesus' command to go and make disciples of all people. The second Great End was the Shelter, Nurture and Spiritual Fellowship of the Children of God. We saw how we are not just supposed to tell but also are supposed to show the good news of God's love through meeting people's needs, through welcoming them with hospitality and nurture, and through being in true community with them, whatever the circumstance.

Today we are looking at the third Great End: the Maintenance of Divine Worship. The Maintenance of Divine Worship.

It will come as no surprise to you to hear that worship attendance in our country is not what it used to be. Studies show that many people choose to spend their Sunday mornings on other pursuits. There are many people who are not members of any church and would not even think about giving up a Sunday morning to go to worship. But statistics show that even people who have been church members for years often choose to be elsewhere on Sunday mornings. They choose recreational activities, travel, or just the desire to relax over being in church. And

while it certainly is understandable to miss worship every now and then, we preacher-types hope that most church members on most Sundays will choose to be in church.

Now that hope is not because of our own egos, that we feel better when we see a packed house, so to speak. The truth is that when we as the people of God all come together to worship, something very special happens among us. You see, God created us, created human beings, with the need to worship Him. We need to worship. And there is something that is missing in our lives, in our hearts, when we do not gather with other believers to give God praise, to pray together, to sing, to hear God's word.

In the world that we live in today, that is especially true. Our materialistic, narcissistic, society is in shock due to the recession that we find ourselves in today. We have to re-orient ourselves to what is true, to what is real, to what has deepest meaning in our lives. Our relationship with God is at the heart of everything. It grounds who we are, it guides the decisions we make, it affects our relationships with others.

When we gather with other believers to worship, we are reconnected with the God who loves us, the God who created us and claims us as His own. We are united with our brothers and sisters in Christ, as we sing and pray and share fellowship together. We are following in the tradition of all those who have gone before us in worshipping our Lord.

Worshipping God with special acts and rituals goes back thousands and thousands of years. In the early chapters of Genesis, we read of Noah building an altar to the Lord. The patriarchs and matriarchs also built altars, even on their journeys, and worshipped God. As time went by, worship became more formal, with the building of the temple in Jerusalem. There God's people would gather for festivals and other special occasions of worship. Sacrifices were offered for the forgiveness of sins. And prayers and praises were sung and recited.

The Psalms that are in our Bible today have been used in worship for thousands of years. Jesus himself used the Psalms as part of his scripture. The corporate psalms were sung by the congregation in worship. This morning we heard and sang the words of Psalm 100 set to music. When you stop to think about it, isn't it staggering to think that people of faith all those years before us were singing and praying the same words that we sang today?

Even though it's only 5 verses long, this Psalm says a great deal to us about our worship of God. First, worship helps us acknowledge who God is. How often do we stop to think about who God is? We may take it for granted that we know who God is. But the truth is that God is greater than anything we can comprehend, and there is always more for us to learn. It is possible to get stuck in a childish view of who God is. To get stuck in a "Now I lay me down to sleep" vision that sees God as a benevolent parent-like figure that we quickly address with our wish list: "Please bless my family and my friends and my dog and my goldfish and give me the new bike I want this summer. Amen." But God is so much greater than that.

If we want to progress beyond a childish understanding of God, we need to be intentional about our life of worship.

Worship helps us see that God is the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Look at verse 3 of this psalm: "It is he that made us and we are his." God is our Creator! But he is not a creator who is removed from us. No, v. 3 says, we are his people and the sheep of his pasture. God cares for us and provides for our needs like a shepherd cares for his sheep. And v. 5 reminds us, "The Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations."

God not only created all that exists, God sustains and gives life to all. God loves us and is faithful to us. God is the one who is present, present in all things, in all places. Worship helps us to recognize the presence and the power of God our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

Second, worship helps us recognize who we are in relationship to God. We were created to have a relationship with God! When that relationship is absent, our lives are not right.

Worship helps us be in right relationship with God. Barbara Brown Taylor says that “worship is the ongoing practice of faith, and not only the practice but the actual experience of it . . . worship is how the people of God practice their reliance on God . . . we do what we were created to do” (*The Preaching Life*, 64).

As Taylor says, “we bring all of who we are to worship. It is a bodily experience and not one for our spirits alone. There are faces to be looked at, voices to be heard, hands to be touched, bread to be tasted, and wine to be smelled” (64).

Think about the things we do in worship. As we begin worship, we greet one another with the peace of Christ. As we do that, we enter into worship together, acknowledging that this is not a solo experience but one that we share with others in community. Our worship teaches us that we need one another. When we say the prayer of confession, we don’t each confess a list of our own individual sins; we confess as Taylor says, “the ways in which all humanity has missed the mark” (71). We are part of the human race that has failed God, and like our sisters and brothers, we need redemption, we need salvation, and we acknowledge that together.

The Prayers of the People are called that for a reason. Whoever speaks them, whether it is me or Lou Ellen or Russell, we are speaking not just for ourselves but for all of us as we join our hearts together in common intercession for others, in our church and our community and our world. We end the Prayers of the People with what? The Lord’s Prayer. Words that we all say together, words first spoken by Jesus to his disciples and then used by countless believers across the centuries and used today by Christians all across the land.

When we affirm our faith, with the words of the Apostles' Creed or other words from our Book of Confessions, we say what WE believe. None of these acts is singular. We say WE and OUR, speaking in the plural, to acknowledge our unity with one another and with other people of God throughout the ages. When one person is absent from worship, it affects us all. We need one another. We are the body of Christ, and as we come here from our own lives and experiences, we become together something larger than ourselves. It is important for you to be here on Sunday mornings, not just for yourself, for what you receive, but for what you contribute by your presence as we become Christ's body together.

Worship helps us acknowledge who God is and worship helps us understand who we are in relationship to God. And finally worship calls us to respond to God and to offer ourselves in service to the world.

Our *Book of Order* contains a beautiful section called the Directory for Worship. The Directory for Worship talks about both how we worship and why we worship. I adapted part of the opening statement of the directory as our Call to Worship this morning, because it so beautifully speaks of what our worship is all about. It says, "Christian worship joyfully ascribes all praise and honor, glory and power to the triune God. In worship the people of God acknowledge God present in the world and in their lives. As they respond to God's claim and redemptive action in Jesus Christ, believers are transformed and renewed. In worship the faithful offer themselves to God and are equipped for God's service in the world" (W-1.1000).

In our church, we begin the service by bringing in the light of Christ, and we end the service by taking out the light to signify that we go forth from here to take the light of Christ into the world. Worship equips us to go and serve others.

In worship, we respond to all that God has done for us. As Psalm 100 says, the response should be joyful and glad. We should give God our thanks and praise as we bless his name. All that we do in worship is a response to God. When we join in the liturgy, we are responding to God. When we pray together, we are responding to God. When we give our offerings, we are responding to God. When we sing, we are responding to God.

We are blessed to have wonderful musicians in this church. Each week Bob and Myra choose music that fits the theme of worship, because the music is so important to what we do here. Can you imagine worship without music? The music of the organ and the choir, and the hymns we sing all play a part in how we worship. Think about the words of the first hymn we sang this morning. “Joyful, Joyful we adore thee, God of glory, Lord of love. Hearts unfold like flowers before thee, opening to the sun above.” Not just the words but the music itself draws us to God, as we open our hearts before him. And as the final verse of that hymn says, “Mortals join the happy chorus which the morning stars began; Love divine is reigning o’er us, joining all in heavens’ plan. Ever singing march we onward victors in the midst of strife. Joyful music leads us sunward in the triumph song of life.”

As we sing words like these, as we pray and praise God together, something happens in our hearts. It has happened to me, and I know it has happened to you, too. You may come to worship troubled with burdens, but somehow as you sit in this place, your heart is lifted. In the music or sermon or the words of scripture, you find solace for grief, hope in place of despair, peace in the midst of confusion. Worship helps give voice to all of the cries of our heart, cries of sorrow or cries of joy. It helps us find words of thanks for all of the blessings that we have received. And even in troubled times, in worship there is “the joy that seeketh through the pain.”

We may not be able to explain it, but you know what I mean when I say that when we gather here, something mysterious and miraculous happens. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we experience the very presence of God. This sanctuary becomes sacred space, as together we encounter the Holy God, who though awesome and transcendent, loves us so much that He entered into our very lives, becoming one of us in Jesus.

My friends, we have an incredible gift in being able to gather here each week to worship our Lord. Let's not take this gift for granted, but let us commit to gather here each week, bringing our joys and our sorrows, knowing that here we become Christ's body together, and God is with us. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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