

Worship Together

Acts 2:37-47

Good Morning Church Family, and welcome to those of you joining us online this morning.

This morning, we're continuing with our series on church essentials. What should the priorities of a church be? What direction does scripture point us in? Last Sunday, we talked about how Jesus is the foundation of our life together, the center from which all other things come out of the, the good soil that we need to root ourselves in, so that we can grow and flourish.

For this morning's sermon, I struggled with what to preach about. There are so many potential topics! I had to remind myself that this is about essentials. This series is not asking what are the many good directions we COULD go, rather it's about what MUST be done. That's harder to discern. In the life of a church, there are so many things clamoring for our attention. Books! Ministry opportunities! New ideas! Old traditions! In my work as a pastor, my email inbox always seems to be telling me about a new conference, a great resource, or a way to improve my ministry. This idea that more is always better is hard to let go of.

One evening this week, I was making cinnamon rolls, the caramel bubbling away on the stove, Ezra was in the bathtub, hollering for a towel to wipe the water out of his eyes. Junia was at the kitchen table colouring and asking me some very urgent questions about what kind of wild jungle animal was my favourite. And as I dashed to the bathroom to assist Ezra, Junia still gabbing away, I wondered if I'd already burnt the caramel and I said out loud, "I'm trying to do too many things at once!" And clearly wasn't doing anything of those things especially well. It's hard for me, hard for many people, and hard for many churches to acknowledge our limitations,

to make peace with our own capacities. Church life isn't supposed to be about filling every moment with more and more good things. Churches need to be places of respecting our humanity, and that means our finite capacity. My friend Thomas likes to say, "God made humans to be humans." Let's remember that.

I would propose that there are two essential actions of the church, and the life of the Christian Disciple, and that is Worship and Life Together. We're going to talk about worship this morning. In the passage that Ed read for us this morning follows immediately after Peter preaches at the temple. He's preached about the life of Jesus of Nazareth and his message has cut the crowds to the heart. What should we do!?, they ask. They need a way to respond to what they have just heard. Peter tells them to repent of their sins and be baptized. The passage says that 3,000 were converted that day. Then verse 42 tells us, "They devoted themselves to apostles teaching and fellowship, to breaking of the bread and the prayers." Further down, the text talks about spending time together at the temple, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And that God is continually adding to their numbers.

When someone says the word 'worship', what comes to your mind? The word worship is super broad-some people mean music and singing, other people think of prayer rituals, or maybe a personal devotional time. Certainly, all those things can be worship. Really, all our lives can be an act of worship to God. Romans 12:1 in the message paraphrase puts that idea very plainly, "So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him." Worship a huge category.

When I talk about essentials of the Church and Worship, I'm talking about what we do together

on Sunday mornings- singing, praying, sharing our hearts, praising God, turning our attention towards God and God's Spiritual reality together. I do think it's telling that the recounting of this fledgling new church only mentions what they did together. Did their conversion change their personal life? Undoubtedly. But we're asked to pay attention to what they did together-as a group.

Why is worshiping together an essential part of the church? First, because God is worthy of praise. Scripture is full of admonitions for God's people to offer him praise, to remember that the lord is good and God is at work in our midst. Psalm 96:1-6 says, "Sing a new song to the LORD!

Let the whole earth sing to the LORD!

Sing to the LORD; praise his name.

Each day proclaim the good news that he saves.

Publish his glorious deeds among the nations.

Tell everyone about the amazing things he does.

Great is the LORD! He is most worthy of praise!

He is to be feared above all gods.

The gods of other nations are mere idols,

but the LORD made the heavens!

Honor and majesty surround him;

strength and beauty fill his sanctuary."

Praising God is the natural response to receiving God's grace in our lives. For my preaching course, I read a book "They like to never quit praisin' God" by Thomas Frank. It's a study of the African-American Style of Celebratory Preaching. If you've ever seen or been a of an African American church service, you'll know that the services are often loud and participatory, with lots

of Amen-ing and Yes Lord-ing. What I didn't know until I read this book is that in the African American tradition, the sermon always ends with a celebration of God's Grace. It always end on the Good News of God's Grace which opens up this opportunity for celebratory praise. In this style of preaching, the only logical response for the congregation is this loud, raucous, glorious praising of God! God's good news, God's grace, move us to praise together- because God is worthy of that praise.

Hebrews 10 offers us a stirring encouragement to keep gathering, together in the presence of God for worship, "And so, dear brothers and sisters, we can boldly enter heaven's Most Holy Place because of the blood of Jesus. By his death, Jesus opened a new and life-giving way through the curtain into the Most Holy Place. And since we have a great High Priest who rules over God's house, let us go right into the presence of God with sincere hearts fully trusting him. For our guilty consciences have been sprinkled with Christ's blood to make us clean, and our bodies have been washed with pure water. Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God can be trusted to keep his promise. Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near."

A note here, meeting together can take many forms -it can be in homes, in church, on Zoom, or any number of options. In this pandemic, especially in the early days, lots of people grabbed hold of the verse about not neglecting meeting together in order to subvert health guidelines. Certainly, we have a preferred way of meeting, but God is not limited to Sunday mornings in a church building, the Spirit is not limited to that, so let's not limit ourselves either.

A word here about worship styles and perspectives, in a past church, I was standing with two friends and we were having a conversation about the service. The one friend, Deniece, was

talking about how much she enjoyed the music that morning, and that particular group of music leaders. The music really made church for her. She looked to us, for agreement. My other friend, Andrea, said “The music was good, but that’s never been what draws me into worship. I’m here for the sermon.” Deneice was shocked. Really? The sermon? She couldn’t believe it. It was this interesting moment of two friends, both of whom loved God and loved this church realizing that they worshiped in very different ways. What drew them to the throne of God, what moved them praise was very different. Here at our church, as with most churches, there exists diversity like the conversation that happened between my friends. Different people worship differently. And what fills me up, what moves me to praise may be very different from Anna, or Bob, or Marg. For myself, I love a liturgy. A well crafted phrase, ritual, communion and something that ties me to Church history. I once jokingly told Char that “Deep down, I think I’m a closeted Anglican.” She replied, “Ahh, that makes sense. I’m a closeted Quaker.” My point here is that diversity in worship is a good thing, and we should welcome diverse expressions, even if they fall flat for us, because for someone else in this room it could mean an encounter with the divine.

Another key reason why worshipping together is a church essential is because worshipping with fellow believers retrains us to see a reality beyond our own -a reality where God is present in us and among us. Worship invites us to see God in our midst. Last week we talked about building our life as people of faith on the truth that Jesus was God in human form, that Jesus reveals to us the heart of God. Further to that, Jesus broke the dividing wall between heaven and earth, Jesus came to be with humanity in our reality. Our world, here and now, is filled with the fullness of God.

One of the most dramatic images from the passion story, Jesus’s death, found in Matthew 27, “Then Jesus shouted out again, and he released his spirit. At that moment the curtain in the

sanctuary of the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, rocks split apart, and tombs opened. The bodies of many godly men and women who had died were raised from the dead. They left the cemetery after Jesus' resurrection, went into the holy city of Jerusalem, and appeared to many people." The curtain in the temple that this passage refers to was the veil that separated the holy place from the Holy of Holies- the place where the spirit of God dwelled. This wasn't some thin, gauzy linen curtain, this was a thick, strong drape and it tears from top to bottom. There is no more separation between God and the people. God has experienced all that humanity has-from birth to death.

I dwell on this idea because it's essential for the church to recognize that God is present and active in our reality- and has been for thousands of years. But we need eyes to see it, we need to recognize and acknowledge that. And worshipping- singing, praying, praising and teaching opens us to that.

Some of you probably know that Taylor is a photographer. (And a terribly good one in my opinion). Taylor bought his first pro camera when he was 19, and started to practice. He'd shoot anything that looked interesting. He'd review and edit the photos. Keep honing his craft. By doing this for sometime, Taylor developed an eye for photography. He'd see potential photographs everywhere. Through the lens of the camera, he'd notice things that most people would otherwise overlook, and soon, whether or not he had his camera with him, he'd see potential photographs everywhere.

Corporate worship is like that. The more we immerse ourselves in the worship-in atuning ourselves to God's presence in this place, the more we'll see God's presence in our daily everyday life. At the end of 1 Corinthians chapter 13, we get a reminder that in loving one another and in worshipping together, we are getting a glimpse of God. The phrasing in the King

James Version is really evocative, For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity." Our vision of God and God's kingdom is through a glass darkly, but corporate worship wipes it a bit clearer, takes some of the frost away.

What can we do? How can we practice this essential? In many ways, it's as simple as showing up (whether in person or online) and making yourself open to what's happening on Sunday mornings. Maybe throwing yourself into a worship practice that is new to you. Maybe it's embracing the truth that you are human, and God made you to be human. Maybe it's holding on, or maybe it's letting go of something. We can trust that the Holy Spirit has led the church through these essentials for centuries, and she certainly isn't going to stop now.

Let's pray.