

Pentecost, Year B  
May 23, 2021  
St. Charles Ave Presbyterian Church  
Psalm 104 and Acts 2  
Rev. Sarah Chancellor-Watson

“The Great Ends of the Church: The Maintenance of Divine Worship”

Writing this morning’s sermon felt like a seminary assignment or some crazy competition show like Iron Chef for preachers – You are preaching in a series of the Great Ends of the Church, and this week’s secret ingredient is Pentecost! The challenges of melding together our exploration of the Great Ends of the Church and the Holy Day of Pentecost actually turned out to be a blessing in disguise. In my preparations I have come to the conclusion that I cannot talk about worship, its significance in our lives, and our duties and responsibilities to it, without mentioning the Holy Spirit and the gifts that the Spirit brings to our worship. Through the power of the Holy Spirit God’s very presence is made known to us to in our worship. The Spirit also sends us out from worship, empowering us with gifts and making holy our lives outside of these walls. Quite simply the Holy Spirit makes our worship even possible. The Spirit makes possible our goal of “maintaining Divine Worship.”

In 9<sup>th</sup> grade I went through the confirmation process at my little Presbyterian Church in Jenks, OK. One key and perhaps unique part of our process was that we went to visit other churches of different denominations to more fully understand our own traditions. At the Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodox Church we stumbled our way through the liturgies and followed the congregation in kneeling and standing and sitting, and attempted not to scrunch our noses too noticeably when the priest brought the incense down the aisle to anoint and bless the congregation. At the Pentecostal church, we wiggled nervously in our seats as the assembly

raised their hands, spoke aloud in strange tongues and even danced in the aisles during the songs and the prayers. At the African American Baptist church, we nodded politely along to chorus of “Amen” and “preach it” during the sermon and tried to not let our growling stomachs give us away when the service lasted far past our usual hour block and well into lunchtime. After our visits we would debrief our experiences, pointing out moments and elements that were similar to our way of worship and moments that were completely new to us. It was a powerful teaching tool for me in my faith development, pointing out these particularities of worship not to demonstrate that our way was somehow superior, but to showcase the diversity in the Body of Christ and our place in it as fellow Christians, and more specifically, as Presbyterians.

There is an ancient church motto that says, “lex orandi, lex cren-dendi,” or “rule of praying, rule of believing.” The worship of the church shapes the belief of the church. Everything about our worship shapes our faith, in the songs that we sing or don’t sing, in the prayers that we pray and in them what we ask for and what we don’t, in the sermons that we listen to, and the ones we ignore, in the scripture texts and stories that we return to again and again, and the ones that rarely see the light of day, and in the ways that we participate or remain passive in worship. Similarly, I think we can say that our beliefs shape our worship and reveal what we think about God, who we are as God’s people, and what aspects of faith are important to us. It’s not an either/or situation, but a both/and, and it’s nearly impossible to disentangle the two. What is clear though is that worship is central and essential to our lives as believers. Our worship is a reflection of us, of our community, and all that makes us unique. The significance of worship is also not confined to services, worship touches all aspects of our

communal life together, and from it flows all our activity – from fellowship, to spiritual formation and discipleship, to service and mission.

This morning we read a portion of Psalm 104, and it is but one of many places in scripture that we turn to remind ourselves of God’s goodness and faithfulness. The psalmist is giving praise to God for all the ways that God cares for the whole of creation, and acknowledges God as the source of all life and the sole recipient of our worship and praise. We come to these times of worship to be reminded of all of God’s good gifts and in our worship we experience God’s presence with us made possible by the Holy Spirit. Every aspect of our worship is centered around this – in our call to worship and in our hymns we ascribe to God praise and thanksgiving, in our confession we acknowledge our dependance on and need for God, in our prayers we nurture our relationship with God by giving thanks as well as tending to the needs of the world, our church, our loved ones and ourselves, as the scriptures are read and proclaimed we hear again the good news of God’s grace, and we participate in that grace through the sacraments. Finally, we are sent out with a charge and a blessing on the wings of the Holy Spirit to continue our worship presenting our lives to God as a continual thank offering for all God has done for us.

The story of the first Pentecost that we read from the book of Acts reminds us of the Spirit’s power and presence in sending us out into the world. This familiar text took on a new significance as I began to wonder, just how did the disciples get from being “all together in one place” to outside where the many people who had gathered in Jerusalem could hear them speaking these many languages? In reading between the lines to what the scripture is not explicitly telling us, I have to believe that with the appearance of the Holy Spirit the disciples

were compelled to leave the place they were gathered and go outside so that God's glory could be on display. Now the Spirit may not be compelling us to act in such dramatic fashion as in the Pentecost story, but we can be assured that the Spirit is moving and acting in our lives, guiding and compelling us in all sorts of ways, if we are open and listen to her leadings.

Romans chapter 12 gives us these words from Paul, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." In her book, *Liturgy of the Ordinary*, author and Episcopal Priest Tish Harrison Warren, applies this scriptural principle to the everyday and mundane things of life. With chapter titles, making the bed, eating leftovers, fighting with her spouse, checking email, calling a friend, and drinking tea, she connects the ordinary actions of her daily routine to worship and life in the Spirit. She says, "In church on Sunday we participate in a liturgy – a ritualized way of worship – that we repeat each week and by which we are transformed. Our Sunday liturgies look different from tradition to tradition. Quakers, Roman Catholics, and Presbyterians worship differently, but within each tradition there are patterns of worship, and through each gathered liturgy congregants are formed in a way of being-in-the-world. Even those traditions that claim to be freeform or nonliturgical include practices and patterns in worship. Therefore, the question is not whether we have a liturgy. The question is, "What kind of people is our liturgy forming us to be?" Our Sunday liturgies teach us a particular idea of the good life, and we are sent out into our week as people who bear out that vision in our workaday world."

*The Book of Order*, the part of the constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) that contains all our rules and guidelines for organizing our church, says this about what we believe

about worship and its “maintenance” - “In Jesus Christ, the Church is called to be a royal priesthood, giving glory to God in worship and devoting itself to God’s service in the world. Worship is a collective activity of the people of God and an expression of our common life and ministry. It demands the full, conscience, and active participation of the whole body of Christ, with heart, mind, soul, and strength... The gifts of the Spirit are for building up the Church. Every action in worship is to glorify God and contribute to the good of the people.”

Now I will admit that this past year has made it hard to strive towards the particular “end” of the church to “maintain Divine Worship,” especially as all our usual ways gathering and worshipping together were cut off to us. But I am reminded that – Thank God – it’s not all up to me or to us. The Spirit provided for so many of our needs in our worship during these many months – in the choir members who continued to provide solos for us to still sing along to our hymns, in the all those who recorded the call to worship or the prayer of the day or the children’s message from your living rooms and kitchen tables, in the church office staff members who stepped up to read scripture and lead us in prayer when we were in a pinch, in the hours spent each week by the loving hands who worked hard to make sure that come Sunday morning our church’s virtual worship would be ready, and in the hundreds who did indeed “tune in” and join us for worship where the Spirit – perhaps doing a little extra heavy lifting, was nevertheless present binding us together. The Holy Spirit guides us still, bringing us all here to this time and place, physically, and yes still virtually, and sending us out once more to continue our worship far beyond these walls, joining all of creation giving thanks and praise to God, our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.