

Why Do We Gather?

In late summer of last year, I decided that rather than returning to the standard 3-year lectionary cycle for my preaching in this liturgical year, I would follow the readings suggested by Brian McLaren in his 2014 book, We Make the Road by Walking. Beginning on September 1, on the Sundays that I've preached, I've shared with you my reflections on those scripture passages. I've not always followed the same themes as McLaren, but my thinking has usually taken his writing as a "jumping off point." A few weeks ago, I started a preliminary look at his chapter for this week, "The Uprising of Worship," and thought, hey, the first Sunday in May, we ought to be back together by then...

That expectation, of course, turned out to be premature. But I decided to stay with the theme I'd chosen for a couple of reasons. Today is the fourth Sunday of Easter, a Sunday celebrated by our liturgical sisters and brothers, and by us, as "Good Shepherd Sunday." Normally, I take that as an excuse to explore one of the many Biblical passages that refer to God or to Christ Jesus as the "Good Shepherd." But we've also, in the past, taken Good Shepherd Sunday as an opportunity to muse together about the nature of our congregation, about what it means to be "Good Shepherd Baptist Church." And, although we are not physically together, we have made the effort to join in this electronic exchange of video and audio, being together virtually if not literally. Why do we do this? And how does this connect us with the two-thousand-year tradition of the Church as a worshipping community, as the scriptures so kindly provided to us by Rev. McLaren show? This morning, I want to take a quick look at the three short passages I've just read in order to share with you my thoughts on why the church at worship has maintained certain key features for nearly two millennia and why those aspects of worship still prove valuable, even when they must be exercised remotely.

One of the attributes of worship mentioned in all three of these passages is teaching. One of the ways in which we manifest our love of God is in the way we seek to learn more about God and God's ways and God's creation. Since you invited me to become your pastor, I have tried very hard to uphold the legacy of preaching which I inherited from preachers like Don Miller, Homer Carter, Ken Chafin, Steve Shoemaker, Danny Vestal, Ron Sisk, Dalene Vasbinder, and Leonard Harmon. I've tried to do justice to the teaching I had from professors like Harold Songer, Frank Tupper, Bill Hendricks, Glen Stassen, Bill Leonard, and Charlie Scalise as well as the myriad theologians, church historians, and Biblical scholars whose books have continued my education. There is a strong history of education here at Good Shepherd. I can't mention all of those who have taught here, even during my tenure, but I'm so grateful for the long-term work of Lannon Thomas and Carol Lavelle with our children and the faithfulness of Pam and Charlie Scalise in bringing a January Bible Study to our adults all these years. And the fact that I can't simply rattle off a short list of teachers here at Good Shepherd is part of our strength in education. Nearly everyone here has taught or shared their experiences in a classroom or in this pulpit and I find that quite remarkable and inspiring. Just as the early Christians sought wisdom about God from the apostles, so we seek wisdom from each other, both speaking from and listening with our hearts.

"Fellowship" was another mark of the early Church and one we continue to this day. Every healthy church I've ever been a part of made it a point to gather regularly just for fun. Again, I'm grateful to those who've been our leaders in this regard at Good Shepherd, not just the deacons who've formally led us in fellowship but all the folks who've gotten groups from our

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number together for a meal, for an outing, for a retreat, for game night or movie night, and so forth. Part of the difficulty of this “stay at home” season has been the lack of opportunity for those relaxed times of conversation and recreation. Zoom makes it relatively easy for us to chat when we are in small groups, but the synergy of live interaction is missing. I’m glad we’ve got the technological tools to weather this storm, but I’ll be awfully glad to be back in the scrum of the narthex on Sunday morning when this is over. Our bonds of love are more easily kept strong when we can gather without fear.

Luke also mentions that the early Christians were devoted to “the prayers.” He is probably referring to the formal prayers offered at various times of the day by observant Jews of the time, both at home and in the Temple. Like all of their Jewish sisters and brothers, the Christians of Jerusalem would have faced a crisis at the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. It had been where they gathered for worship as well as the ancient symbol of God’s presence among the people. They had to learn, just as those in the Exile had learned and as those in the Diaspora still knew, that God is not limited to place. God heard their prayers no matter where they were and hears ours still. But we have suffered, I think, with the fading of the tradition of specific prayers for specific times of the day and specific times in our lives. Those traditional prayers can serve as a grounding in our lives every day. I was reminded in 2011, during my visits to Taizé and Iona, how spiritually enriching it can be to take time to gather for prayer at specific intervals during the day and I’m reminded of the virtue of this practice often as I observe Muslim sisters and brothers excuse themselves from other activities at the appropriate times each day for prayer.

Those specific times for prayer have not been a part of our heritage in the radical reformation. On the other hand, we do have a robust heritage of individual prayer as Baptists. Once again, I’m grateful to all of you who allowed me to make the Prayer of Thanksgiving part of the duties of our Sunday morning hosts. It’s important for us to hear each other pray. It reminds us that each of us have the ear of God. It reminds us that each of us is called to seek the presence of God. Eloquence is not necessary in public prayer. In fact, Jesus cautioned against it. That’s because the real audience for our public prayers is not each other but God. When we speak to God, we should simply and directly say what is in our heart. Again, that’s what I try to do when I pray on behalf of the congregation, especially in pastoral prayers. We should never be embarrassed to be tongue-tied or inelegant in speech when we pray. God hears our hearts and those who are listening in, certainly in this congregation, love us whether our prayers are smooth and composed or jagged with emotion. It’s good that we can pray together.

Luke also mentions that the early church shared resources among themselves and cared for each other. And, although it is not mentioned in either of the passages from Paul’s letters that I read this morning, Paul often reported on and encouraged generosity in the churches with whom he corresponded. This is still a mark of Christians around the world and at Good Shepherd. We give for many reasons – to provide a physical or electronic place for gathering, to pay those who work for us, to help those who are hungry or otherwise in need, to support the ministries of our region and denomination, and so on. We do these things to honor God and to care for others. I am pleased to be able to say of this congregation, as Luke said of the Christians in Jerusalem, that we give with glad and generous hearts. It’s a good sign that we are truly trying to live into one of our favorite hymns: “They’ll know we are Christians by our love.”

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It's worth noting that, by the actions I've spoken of, the first Christians earned the goodwill of their neighbors in Jerusalem, as Luke relates. In fact, the generosity of Christians not only to each other but to those outside the Church caught the attention of the Roman Emperor Julian, often called Julian the Apostate because he had returned to the worship of the traditional Roman gods after a brief time as a Christian. In about 337 CE, after a time of war and famine, plague was rampant in the Roman Empire, a situation not terribly different from our own. The Emperor wrote to the high priest in Galatia, "when it came about that the poor were neglected and overlooked by the [pagan] priests, then I think the impious Galilæans [i.e., Christians] observed this fact and devoted themselves to philanthropy. [They] support not only their poor, but ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us... it is their benevolence to strangers, their care for the graves of the dead and the pretended holiness of their lives that have done most to increase atheism..." Those Roman Christians were, of course, called atheists because they only believed in one God rather than many. We've seen a similar reaction here in Lynnwood due to our generosity. I'm sure that many of you remember that our plan for Shepherd's Garden was NOT popular with some of our neighbors. But after we showed that we were going to do what we said we were going to do, people's opinions changed. Before we started Shepherd's Village, I sent a letter to many of those same neighbors and got only support for our plan. Our neighbors respect us because we gave and continue to give generously to those in need without reference to their beliefs.

Not mentioned by Luke in our passage from Acts but mentioned by Paul in both of the letters I read earlier is the tradition of Christian singing. It is, of course, a tradition we inherited from our Jewish forebears. As Rev. Dwight A Moody put it in a sermon on this topic, "Our Bible is full of songs... Moses sang. David sang. Jesus sang. Paul and his churches were singing churches. The Bible even asserts that at the creation the morning stars sang together, and the Revelation of John, in its vision of the final victory of God, the dominant exercise of the world to come, is singing." Psalms, of course, was the hymnal shared by Jews and Christians for centuries. A love of singing has been another mark of the healthy churches I've been a part of and one of the ways that Connie and I knew we would be at home at Good Shepherd is the delight that this small congregation has taken in singing together. As with prayer, because singing is a form of prayer, it's important to remember that our audience is God, not each other. That's why it's ok to sing out even if you are unsure of the note – make a joyful noise before the Lord! A heartfelt song is, you should pardon the expression, music to God's ears, even if it is a little off-key. It's because music is a prayer that you will hear me, as my tradition taught, say "Amen!" after Pam plays or the choir sings, rather than applauding. I'm giving my second to the prayer. That's not to say applause is wrong – we all come from different traditions after all. But let's make sure we're applauding the prayer in the music and not just the performance.

Music is also an important part of the teaching function of the Church, to circle back around to where I started. It's easy for the human brain to remember songs. Some of the most memorable passages in the New Testament, as well as the Old, are understood by scholars to be derived from hymns. "In the beginning was the Word, and the word was with God, and the Word was God..." "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the

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cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Wow. Beautiful. And then there are the songs we use to teach our children, songs that we probably couldn’t forget if we tried: “Jesus loves me, this I know...” “Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world...” We are a singing people and we thank God for the gift of music with which we thank and praise God.

So, why do we gather, Good Shepherd, even when we can only gather virtually? We gather to learn from each other about the things of God, about how to live in the Way of Jesus. We gather to have fellowship with each other, to enjoy each other’s company, to laugh together and to cry together. We gather to pray together, to seek God’s presence, to thank God for the good things God has put into our lives and to petition God on behalf of ourselves and others. We gather so that we can share of our resources as we answer Jesus’ call to care for the least of these, his brothers and sisters who are in need so that we can help the world to see the reality of the love of God that shines through us. We gather to sing together, to praise God in yet another way that lifts our hearts in good times and bad.

And we gather for something special, only peripherally mentioned in Acts but the subject of a significant part of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, although not the part I read earlier. We gather to remember that on the night Jesus was betrayed, he took bread and wine and gave us a remarkable symbol to remember him by. It is a symbol that we inherit, as we do so much, from our Jewish sisters and brothers, a symbol of God’s remarkable love for a people in trouble. Just as God redeemed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, so God stands ready, through Christ Jesus, to redeem us from the sin and brokenness that plagues our lives. Together, in a moment, we will eat the bread that reminds us that Jesus is the Bread of Life, that his teachings and example are as necessary for abundant life as the most simple food. Together, we will drink from the cup that reminds us that Jesus shed his blood but that for us his suffering has turned to joy. We cannot pass the elements, we can only partake together, but the symbolism is as rich and moving on a screen as it would be were we together. And we will do this thing, as Paul wrote, in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Even though circumstances keep us apart, yet we are together, made one in Christ through the Holy Spirit, ’til we meet again. Amen.