

People Gathered Worship

Sermons for the month of January have been devoted to the study of worship. Today's sermon takes a look at what we might call "People Gathered" worship. We gather for worship as individuals, but at the same time we gather as one body, the church. We will also examine some aspects of why we do what we do in worship. Today's text is from Hebrews 10 "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching." (Hebrews 10:19-25)

A customer went to a local sandwich shop and afterwards complained "I find I constantly get either ingredients on my sub I didn't ask for, or a sub missing some ingredients I did ask for. I'm not that picky, so one day when I was in a rush I asked for a 6-inch meat-lovers with everything.

Clerk: "Do you want lettuce?"

Me: "Yeah, everything please."

Clerk: "Cheese?"

Me: "Yes, just put everything on it please."

Clerk: "Pickles?"

Me: "Yes, everything, the works, please."

This went on for every ingredient, getting more annoying with each step, until we reached the salt and pepper.

Clerk: "Salt?"

Me: (*wanting to get going*) "No, that's ok."

Salt goes on anyway.

Clerk: "Pepper?"

Me: "Yeah."

No pepper.

Finally the sub's rung up, and I rush out of the store. Half an hour later, I open the sandwich and notice there's no meat on my meat-lover sub.

I believe this story has some practical application for our topic today. Besides the obvious, that is the "Let us" (lettuce pun intended) in the text I just read. I'd like to highlight all the "Let us" encouragements in our text. These are:

"Let us" draw near to God

"Let us" hold unswervingly to the hope we profess

"Let us" consider how we may spur one another on

"Let us" not give up meeting together

"Let us" encourage one another

Another application is the "fast food" approach to worship. Get in, grab a quick bite, not have too much conversation, get out, and back to the events of the day. One of the

biggest misconceptions today that people have about worship is the idea of what's in it for me, that casual attitude toward worship. There's also application in the "Have it your own way" approach to worship. Chances are each one of us has our own idea about what worship ought to be. Or maybe you think you should only hear what you want to hear in worship like our sandwich customer, rather than what you need to hear. Finally, worship can be filled with a lot of condiments, lettuce and such, but like the sandwich in the story, contains "no meat". No Jesus!

In a practical sense how do we draw near to God as the first "Let us" of our text encourages us to do? We draw near to God, when we allow God to strip away the false fronts and the lame excuses and we acknowledge our brokenness before God. We place our trust in Jesus and the promise that God has made to forgive our sins for Jesus' sake. That's why we have a time of confession and forgiveness at the beginning of each worship service, to remove the guilt we carry and free us to worship God with a thankful hearts. The power to declare forgiveness of sins to each other is a wonderful gift Jesus gave to all believers after his resurrection. His words are recorded in John 20 "Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." (John 20:21-23) The words of forgiveness or absolution that we hear in worship have the same authority as if Jesus were speaking them to us himself. We also remind each other of the forgiveness that is ours in Jesus, as we sing songs and recite the creeds. That's why it is necessary to for us to gather together as a body of believers in corporate worship.

Last week, I was traveling up Towne Road after leaving work early to take my mother-in-law for an appointment. I was running behind schedule and seeing open road ahead, I decided step on it to make up for lost time. Now I'm not advocating speeding and I confess that what I did was wrong. Also, I'm not demonstrating the length at which some might go for a sermon illustration. As I crested a hill, to my surprise a police officer appeared from opposite direction. As I glanced at the speedometer and hit the brakes, I saw the officer's brake lights in the rear view mirror. I knew I got caught and as I watched him turn around all the thoughts went through my mind. I'm going to be late, my mother-in-law is going to wonder where I am, then there's the fine and increased insurance premiums, and what's my wife going to say. At that moment my car seat became my judgment seat. The police officer caught up with me quickly and followed me for some time and I waited for the lights to go on. After a couple of miles of watching in my rear view mirror and fretting, to my surprise he turned around and went back. At that moment, I realized his judgment on me was "Mercy". And the rush of relief overtook me and my thankfulness welled up inside me. I would not receive the penalty I deserved. That relief and much more ought to be the feeling we have when we hear the words "your sins are forgiven" from Pastor or another believer.

Have you ever thought about what life would be like with any foundational truth or defining purpose? The song we sang earlier, "Brothers and Sisters (in Christ)" captures what I am trying to describe. Allow me to read verse 2 again, "Man walked alone and in need, without faith, hope or promise or creed; wandering aimlessly lost, unaware of the staggering cost; that God in His mercy would save, all His people from death and the

grave.” From my experience, people that get lost, such as in the woods, don’t know they’re lost. They think they know where they are going and it’s only when someone finally convinces them that they are lost will they admit it. When we confess the creeds, the Apostles Creed and Nicene Creed, God reminds us that we too were lost until Jesus saved us. And we remind each other of that as well. That’s why the writer of Hebrews encourages us with the second “Let us” of our text “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.” Christians have gathered in worship and confessed even simple creeds, such as “Jesus Christ is Lord”, since Jesus’ ascension into heaven. Today we have the Apostles Creed or Nicene Creed as foundational truths of the Christian church. We speak these together to remind each other of what has been the Christian faith, what we believe today, and what the Christian faith will be tomorrow in the next generation.

Lee County Illinois, which is in north central Illinois, near the town of Mendota, has been researched according to average wind velocity and found to be the most ideal site in the Midwest for the installation of electrical wind turbines or generators. Maybe some of you have traveled Interstate 39 between Bloomington and Rockford and have seen these and wondered about them. There is a picture of a few of them on the screen (need picture from Margaret). They make up the Mendota Hills Wind Farm and consist of 63 giant wind turbines strategically placed, each 300 feet tall and 170 feet in diameter. They are huge. Connected together with only the power of the wind, they are able to generate electricity for about 15,000 homes.

I thought about these generators and then I thought about the third “Let us”, “Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.” First of all without the wind no electricity is generated. The same goes for us, without Jesus and His gift of the Holy Spirit, we are powerless to love and do good deeds, such as serving one another, praying for each other, giving of our time, talents, and money, and reaching out to those who do not know Jesus. We model this in worship through the prayers of the church and the gathering of offerings. Secondly, one generator at best can supply only a few homes, but together they can do great things. Similarly, when we are connected to God the power source and with each other as our church family, we can draw strength to make a huge difference for the cause of Jesus Christ. Consider the words of Ecclesiastes 4 “Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.” (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12)

The fourth “Let us” is “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing.” We do this because we are part of a family, brothers and sisters in Christ as we sung earlier. I come from a large extended family and on my Mom’s side alone there are 64 first cousins. I don’t think we have ever all gotten together at the same time, but when we do, even if it’s a few or many, we celebrate. We celebrate the family heritage that we have. We tell stories. We celebrate those that have gone on to be with the Lord, Grandpa and Grandpa, Aunts and Uncles. And we celebrate each other’s accomplishments, cry over each other’s disappointments and miss those who are not there.

As a church family, I think we do that well here at Lord of Life. I'm always amazed at all the buzz, before and after worship. But there no doubt have been times when some of you, myself included, have for one reason or another thought that something else was more important than going to church. Now we wouldn't think about doing that when considering whether or not we go to Grandma's house for Thanksgiving Dinner or a brother's wedding or even Aunt Nell's funeral. It's a matter of caring for our family enough to be there to celebrate and support, as the case may be. Believe it or not, the whole body suffers or gains energy, depending on whether each person shows up. Make church a habit as our text encourages us to do.

Finally, "Let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching." New Testament writings indicate that soon after Jesus' ascension into heaven, the early Christians had a feeling about the imminent return of Christ. They thought He would return even within their own lifetime. Sunday worship for them was a celebration of His death and resurrection and the new life they have in Jesus. They were excited about his return and so they shared their new life with those around them. We heard a description of their actions from Acts, read earlier. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." (Acts 2:42-47)

It's been almost two thousand years and the second coming of Jesus has yet to take place. We still don't know when He will return, but we do know that each day is one day closer. We ought to be excited about that, tomorrow could be the day. Just like the early Christians, we ought to expect the Lord's return at any time. For those who live in his forgiveness, that great news! And if it's not tomorrow, that great news too because we live in the power of His Resurrection today. He's alive my friends, you know it and I know it. You can feel yourself respond to his power just like those giant wind turbines respond to the wind. Let Him fill you with His Holy Spirit as he serves you in worship, through His Word and His Body and Blood.

So: "Let us" draw near to God
"Let us" hold unswervingly to the hope we profess
"Let us" consider how we may spur one another on
"Let us" not give up meeting together and
"Let us" encourage one another.

In the power of Jesus. Amen!