

Arise: Worship Acts 2:42-47

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Let me start today with a little history...all the way back to the first century.

Shortly after that first Easter morning, there were frequent reports of people seeing the risen Christ in a variety of locations. But as time went on, those reports became less frequent until they stopped entirely. In time, the first disciples came to believe that Jesus had ascended into heaven and was now sitting at the right hand of God. And that fueled a lot of speculation and debate among the early Christians as to what they should expect. Some of those early Christians, including Paul for a time, believed that Jesus' return was imminent, establishing God's Kingdom on earth. But as time passed, the early Church realized that what mattered was not when Christ would appear to them, but how Christ would appear in them, among them and through them. They were to be his hands, his feet, his face, his smile, his voice...his embodiment on earth.

That's a high calling, and the early Christians knew that if they were going to faithfully respond to that calling, they would need to do some body building. Put another way, they knew that they needed to be shaped by grace to be formed more and more into the likeness of Christ...to effectively be the body of Christ to the world. And one of the primary habits they engaged in to avail themselves of that grace was worship. The early Church seemed to know two things that we sometimes forget. First, we are profoundly shaped by what we worship. We all worship something. Even people who say that they have no faith worship something. So, if the early Christians wanted to be formed into the likeness of Christ, they needed to worship Christ. And second, they knew that being spiritually formed happens most effectively in community.

I've certainly found that to be true in my own journey of spiritual formation. I love alone time in Scripture and prayer, but my most formative experiences have been in small group, in worship and on mission

trips. And perhaps more than anything else... being married. Martin Luther taught, "Marriage is a better school for the character than any monastery, for it's here that your sharp corners are rubbed off." Now, don't get me wrong. You don't have to be married to be spiritually formed, but I do believe that we need to be in community to be formed. And that's one of the reasons that worship matters. It's why the early Christians gathered for worship – to be formed so that they could effectively fulfill their calling to be the body of Christ in the world. And the same is true for you and me.

Today's Scripture reading gives us a glimpse into what those early gatherings were like. Listen to these words from Acts 2:42-47:

⁴² All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer. ⁴³ A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. ⁴⁴ And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. ⁴⁵ They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need. ⁴⁶ They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity— ⁴⁷ all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God!

There is remarkably little written in the New Testament about how Christian worship is to be conducted. And that might explain, in part, why worship styles vary so dramatically across the broad spectrum of churches. We've got everything from three worship songs and a 50-minute sermon to a high mass with smells and bells – and just about everything in between. Today's Scripture reading highlights four elements of worship that marked those early gatherings. I want to tease them out today and remind us of how important each is to our worship life and how each shapes us as disciples.

First, those early disciples devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles. The early Christians knew that the way of Jesus was a life quite different from the way of the Roman empire, and so they relied upon

those who knew Jesus best to teach and mentor them. The teaching of the apostles shaped the minds and the hearts of those early disciples – not so much to educate them but to mentor them in how to live like Jesus in the world.

Today we call that aspect of worship “the sermon,” but its purpose remains the same. When we preachers do our job right, we’re not merely educating you about doctrine or history. And we’re certainly not merely entertaining you. We’re equipping you to live differently in the world, in daily life. And when you, as disciples are worshiping “right,” you’re not merely letting these words go in one ear and out the other. You’re intentionally listening for how our faith in Christ shapes how we live in the world, shaping how we think, how we see, how we make decisions and how we treat others. The book of James puts it this way, *“Don’t just listen to God’s word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. For if you listen to the word and don’t obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like.”*

Second, the early disciples shared the Lord’s Supper together. Just as God had commanded the Israelites to share the Passover meal to remember how God had freed them from slavery in Egypt, the early disciples shared the Lord’s Supper to remember how Jesus’ life, death and resurrection set them from the sin, guilt and shame that separated them from God and one another. And we continue to share the Lord’s Supper for the very same reason. Jesus said, “Every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, remember me.” To remember literally means to “re-member,” to bring together that which has been separated. In our Lenten worship series entitled “Dwelling,” we talked about the ways in which the Holy Spirit, God’s living presence, dwells within us. But throughout the week it’s so easy to forget that. And so, we come together around this simple meal of bread and wine – a meal in which all are welcome – to re-member our lives to the One who promises to be present in, with and under the bread and wine. And when we remember that our lives are inextricably woven together with God’s, we live differently in the world.

Third, the early disciples’ gatherings including fellowship and sharing. They shared their experiences and their sense of God at work in their lives. They shared their insights from Scripture. They shared their tears, their fears, their failures and their joys. And they shared their financial resources with any member of

the community who had a need. What a profoundly counter-cultural way to live!

If you’ve ever traveled in a foreign country perhaps you know the experience of running into a fellow American citizen. It doesn’t matter who they are, what state they’re from, how old they are or how they vote politically – there is an instant bond that draws you together. And I think it was something like that for the early Church. They felt themselves to be strangers in a foreign land, but when they encountered a fellow disciple, they felt an instant bond.

While that kind of fellowship may not happen within the context of our worship services, it’s the reason we built the Community Room right outside the door of this Sanctuary. It may appear on the surface that that space is just about coffee and cookies, but if you scratch just below the surface, you’ll discover that it’s a space designed to help us live into our motto: Called to Connect. It’s where fellow citizens of the Kingdom of God gather. Sisters and brothers in the family of God come and share their hopes and dreams as well as their struggles and hurts – so that we can love and support one another. We do that in the Community Room, in small groups, as we volunteer together, and as we pray together. And that leads us to the fourth and final thing those early disciples did when they gathered...

The early disciples prayed when they gathered. They learned that it was better to give their concerns to God rather than be filled with anxiety over things they could not control. They prayed for one another. They prayed for those in leadership, even the Roman Emperor who oppressed them. They prayed for peace and justice in the world. And they prayed that God’s Kingdom would come on earth as it is in heaven.

And we do the same thing today. Sometimes our prayers are prayers of confession. Sometimes they are prayers of intercession for others. And sometimes we pray for ourselves, that God would heal us, help us, and shape us more and more into the kind of disciples through whom the light and love and Christ shine into this world. But our prayers don’t end when our worship gatherings end. Pastor Jason reminded us several weeks ago that on the resource wall in the Community Room next to the elevator is a list of the prayer concerns that we receive each week. Grab a copy as you leave today and add your voice to the chorus of prayers that are raised to God each week.

And not only that, but we have an extensive prayer

ministry at Prince of Peace. We have a prayer team that regularly prays for the needs of our community and the world. And you're welcome to be part of that team even if you don't live anywhere near Prince of Peace. Simply contact Jody Slaughter at jslaughter@popmn.org.

Lots of things have changed in the 2000 years since the early disciples gathered for worship. But some things have not changed. We still rely upon Scripture to teach us. We still share a simple meal of bread and wine to re-member our lives to the life of Christ. We still care for one another in fellowship and we still pray for the needs among us and all around us.

Today I want you to think about each of those four elements. I'm wondering if perhaps there is one element that you've perhaps been taking for granted. If you're honest perhaps you can admit that you've been going through the motions, that you've allowed the deeper meaning to slip out of your awareness. Perhaps you're listening to the sermon without considering how you'll live it out. Or you take communion but you're thinking about your shopping list. Or you come in and out of this space without even sharing a word of greeting with another worshiper. Or it's been a long time since you took the privilege of praying for others seriously. I don't bring this up to guilt or shame you. I'm guilty of every one of those things. But today I'm challenging us all to come back to center, to worship with greater intentionality, to awaken anew to the importance of what we do in worship. Because worship is about so much more than "being fed." It's about being spiritually formed, shaped into the body of Christ in the world and for the world. Let's pray...

Lord Jesus, you are worthy of all of our worship and praise, and it is our honor and privilege to love and worship you with all of our heart, mind, soul and strength. As we pour ourselves out in worship, we ask that your Spirit would shape us, not just as individuals but as a community committed to loving others as Jesus did. Save us from the temptation of making worship about what we get out of it, or about our personal preferences. Teach us to trust that worship shapes us most powerfully when it is all about you. This we pray in the strong name of Christ, and together all people said...Amen.