

Together for Good Sermon Series
Together We Worship
Hebrews 10:19-25
By Rev. Joy W. Laughridge
October 18, 2020

Today is the first Sunday of Stewardship season, and, of course, I just can't say that it's "stewardship season" without pointing out that stewardship really isn't a seasonal activity. It's an all-the-time, whole-life response to the grace that God has shown to us in Christ that involves the constant giving of ourselves, and our spiritual gifts, and our material resources to be used in service to God and others, but with that said, it is our tradition to take a few weeks at the close of the year to *emphasize* stewardship, and today we begin emphasizing.

The theme for our emphasis this year is *Together for Good*, and there is a reason that that's the theme that was chosen for this year. It has been said over and over what a strange and different year this past one has been because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and one of the hardest parts of this past year has been the decision to close the church buildings. Closed church buildings have not kept us from being the Church, but they have definitely disrupted our normal ways of doing things and being together, and I think most of us have especially missed being together. That is why, when Cathy, C.J. and I met to discuss the stewardship emphasis for this year, we felt led to focus on togetherness. We wanted to create an opportunity to reconnect with each other in the small group gatherings that are coming up next weekend and the week after, and also to recommit ourselves to togetherness - in whatever form that may take as we ride out Covid - because even if we have to work and worship at a distance from each other for a time, being the Church, and being *this* church, is *together* work. We can't be the Church in any other way. Over the next few weeks then, our focus will be on the things that we do together and why it's important that we do them together, and today we begin with worship.

Christian worship gives all glory and honor, praise and thanksgiving to the holy, triune God, and the Scriptures are clear about the fact that worshiping God is not just a suggested or optional activity for God's people. It is essential. You probably recall the words of the Westminster Catechism that teach us that to glorify God and fully enjoy God forever is our chief and highest end. If we fail to worship God, we miss our greatest purpose and a

basic element of being human. It becomes impossible to live life to the fullest extent, and we will feel the longing that the Psalmist properly identifies as the human longing for connection with God when he says, **“O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.”**

The worship of God that is due to God and essential to our being can find expression in lots of different ways, and it can be a private offering that I bring on my own or we can come together with others to worship corporately as we are doing now. The rub sometimes is that people neglect one or the other, but both are important and necessary. The appeal of private worship is that it can be offered at any time that is personally convenient and it can be offered anywhere – on the beach, in the mountains, from my bed. It can be self-directed – I choose the Scriptures I’ll read, or I’ll spend this much time in prayer and this much time reading - and it can be offered in any form that I like. I might sing, or draw a picture, or talk to God out loud, or meditate in silence. For these reasons, and maybe others, there is sometimes a temptation to neglect corporate worship that demands more of us in some ways, but in Scripture we see that meeting together for worship with other believers is both modeled and mandated.

The model is described in Acts 2 where we are told about the church’s very beginnings. Acts 2:41-42 says, **“So those who welcomed his [Peter’s] message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. ⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”** Right there we see the pattern for worshipping together that we follow to this day - gathering around the word *together*, praying *together*, celebrating the Sacraments *together*. We are meant to seek, and find, and celebrate God *together*. That is the model, and the mandate for believers to keep practicing. This pattern is found in our main Scripture text for this morning from Hebrews 10. Hebrews 10:19-25 says,

“Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), ²¹and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²²let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. ²³Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without

wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

The author of Hebrews was aware that there were some believers who had neglected the practice and the pattern of meeting together for worship. We don't know the reasons for this, though it may have been for fear of being persecuted. Hebrews is written to Jewish believers who were under some pressure to abandon Christ and the apostle's teaching that many of the Jews believed to be false and dangerous. If getting together to worship and publicly witness to the person and work of Christ was going to be costly, that may have been the reason they didn't want to do it, but the author exhorts them to do it anyway. Even if there were risks involved, meeting together was that important.

My former colleague at St. Andrews in Dunedin used to say, “I know that there may be some people who are here today because you have a drug problem - your mother, or your grandmother drug you to church.” There *might* be someone here today with that kind of “drug” problem, but I expect that most, if not all, who are worshipping here in the Sanctuary and who are joining us online this morning are here because you have understood along with the author of Hebrews just how important it is to get together with others to worship God on a regular basis. You have realized certain things about the work and experience of worshipping together that have inspired your commitment to participate regularly.

For example, you have recognized with the author of Hebrews that just having the ability to come into the presence of a holy God is a gift - and not a cheap gift either. Our ability to approach God with confidence and without fear or shame is a gift that Jesus paid for with the sacrifice of his own life, and it is a gift that we have learned not to take for granted.

You are here because you have discovered that worshipping with others helps you to be a better worshipper. It gives you strength to praise and delight in God in ways that you can't or don't on your own. Doris York shared something with me last week and told me, “there's probably a sermon in there somewhere,” and there was! She was remembering when the Tampa Bay Buccaneers won the Super Bowl and she found herself downtown the day they were having a celebratory parade. She said she didn't even care

about it that much, but she went out on the street to join the crowds, and she said that as she felt the energy and excitement of the crowd she started getting more and more excited herself. This same kind of thing happens to us when we worship with others. We see someone else's joy and enthusiasm in worship, and it becomes contagious. When we listen and see others using their gifts as they sing, or play instruments, or perform dramas, or preach the word, it elevates our own expressions of adoration, appreciation, and love for God.

I expect that you are also here because you have discovered that worshipping with others supports your faith in the God we worship together. When I was a young adult in seminary, I was going through some of the typical doubting and uncertainty about my faith and how to live out my faith that young adults go through. Most of the friends I had at the restaurant where I was working while I was in school were faithless, and in that environment, sometimes I felt like I was completely weird and misguided for believing what no one else around me seemed to believe or embrace. One of the things that kept me going throughout that season was worshipping with others every Sunday. I remember sitting in the worship services and thinking, "I'm not alone in believing what I believe. This whole community of people sitting all around me also believes," and it gave me strength and helped me to worship God even when sometimes I didn't feel like God was real.

Still another reason I expect you are here is because you have seen and sensed God's real presence here in and among the people. In Ephesians 2:19-22, the Apostle Paul explains that together, we are a building and a Temple where God makes God's dwelling. **"So then you are no longer strangers and aliens,"** he says, **"but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit."** When we are together, God is actually present and with us in a very real way that can be sensed, and felt, and experienced.

When I think about the soul of LPC, I recognize that this is a congregation that loves worshipping together, and I am so thankful to be the Pastor of a congregation that understands the importance of worshipping together. You

demonstrate that you have understood the biblical model and the mandate for worshipping together in so many ways. I see it in the ways that you do share your gifts as worship leaders who sing, and play instruments, and give messages to our children, and read Scripture, and share testimonies, and do drama. I see it in your desire to gather, not just on Sunday mornings, but for special Services for Wholeness and Healing or special Holy Week services. Most of all, I see it in your commitment to just showing up in general which has been demonstrated so clearly throughout the Covid pandemic.

Back in March when we made the decision to be closed on Sundays, it was not an easy decision to make. We knew that we had to continue to offer the opportunity to worship corporately somehow. Your leaders figured out a way to make that happen, and you supported it. You supported it by getting together online- and some of you are still joining us that way. Some of you supported it by giving extra to help fund the cost of the equipment that was needed to record and stream a quality service. Under the circumstances, it would have been easy to “neglect meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing,” but you didn’t. It would have been easy to skip over the work involved that has allowed us to have worship online and has also allowed us to provide a place for others to worship online, but you didn’t.

The example of how you came together and how you have supported the ministry of corporate worship is a great example of stewardship. We may all know how wonderful it is to worship together, but, as this example reminds us, worship gatherings don’t just happen. They happen when the people of God work together to make them happen. They happen when people give to provide a place for the gatherings to happen. They happen when people give of their time to serve as ushers, and musicians, and leaders. To be faithful to our calling as a local congregation to maintain the practice of corporate worship. Each one of us must be committed not just to showing up but to working together to make a place where we and others *can* show up.

I am thankful to God for the saints that stewarded their gifts and resources to provide a place for me to experience the blessing and the joy of worshipping together with others. I have very fond memories of the churches that helped form my faith, and many of you probably do too. I shared a quote from Theodore Roosevelt earlier this week on our church Facebook page. He said, “you may worship God anywhere, at any time, but the chances are that you will not do so unless you have first learned to worship Him somewhere, in some particular place, at some particular time.” Lakewood has been that

place for you and for others for close to 70 years, and God is not finished with us yet. God continues to call us to be a dwelling place for His presence right here on University Blvd., and as we continue to be that, lives will be changed, and formed, and blessed because that's what happens when people encounter the triune God, and people encounter God when we worship together. Amen.