

# Worship Is \_\_\_\_\_

## Hebrews 10:19-25 (Bringing Our Mission Into Focus - Worship)

Over the last 150 years, worship is something that our congregation has done week in and week out. When was the last time you recall worship was cancelled all together? It probably has only been a very small number of times when worship wasn't offered on a Sunday morning most likely due to bad weather. Even during the COVID gathering limitations earlier this year, worship was still offered in some form albeit only a couple of us were in the building. But what is this thing we do together and call "worship"? How would you fill in that blank? Worship is \_\_\_\_\_

Worship as we are doing now can take on many forms and structures. It can be done in many different languages, but most often done in the language a church's people understand. It can be held in different locations - in a church building as we do regularly, outside, a gymnasium, a storefront, a schoolhouse, homes. You name it and worship can happen there and has happened in some of those places in the history of our congregation. Yet the essence of worship remains the same. However you filled in the blank, today, the writer to the Hebrews helps us understand worship, one way that our church uses to carry out its mission. He takes us back to think about worship in the temple before Jesus came.

**"Brothers, we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place through the blood of Jesus. It is a new and living way he opened for us through the curtain that is, his flesh. We also have a great high priest over the house of God. So let us approach with a sincere heart, in the full confidence of faith, because our hearts have been sprinkled to take away a bad conscience, and our bodies have been washed with pure water." (vs. 19-22)** The Most Holy Place, also called the Holy of Holies, was the room in the temple where no one entered except the high priest on the Day of Atonement. When he went into that room to offer up the blood of the sacrifice on behalf of the people's sins, he would step through this big heavy curtain. When he entered that room, it was as if he was standing in God's holy presence. The average, common Israelite could not go in there because no sinner could stand in the presence of a holy God. Sin separates the holy God and sinful man.

But remember our Great High Priest, Jesus who himself was the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. When he died on the cross that huge curtain was torn in two from top to bottom. Sins were paid for. No sacrifice for sins remained and so people could approach God. You and I are invited to approach our God and come before his presence. As we gather together for worship that is what we are doing. Worship is approaching God's throne of grace at his invitation confident in our Great High Priest Jesus who opened that curtain for us.

Confident in Jesus, we come before him with a sincere heart that confesses our need for his grace trusting we receive that undeserved love through Jesus. When we began our worship today, you were invited to approach God with that true heart and confess your sins asking him to forgive you. Then like so many other times, we did just that. Then grace was proclaimed to you through the spoken absolution. "As a called servant of Christ and by his authority, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

Yet that reception of grace continues throughout our time of worship through his Word which proclaims Jesus. Grace is sprinkled upon our lips and hearts as we approach his table. Receiving the body and blood of Jesus in the bread and wine that was given and shed for you, we receive the forgiveness of our sins. Our guilty conscience finds relief in Jesus. When we are pointed to the baptismal font, we are reminded that through the waters of Baptism God washed us clean of sin through Jesus. Approaching God's presence in worship, his throne of grace, we are given grace. Receiving his grace through Word and Sacrament our faith is strengthened. We have hope to hold on to and

hope to confess. **"Let us hold on firmly to the confession of our hope without wavering, since he who promised is faithful." (vs. 23)**

I often think about our worship together like a good conversation between God and his people. Good conversations are never one sided. They are two-sided. One person speaks and the other listens attentively. Then the one who listened responds and the speaker becomes the listener who listens with the same attentiveness. Isn't that what happens when we gather in God's house and worship. Worship in God's presence is really that kind of conversation. God speaks to us through his Word and the Sacraments strengthening our faith's hold on the hope we have in Jesus. And in return after listening attentively and receiving joyfully, we respond with what I'm going to call "The Three Ps" - prayer, praise, and proclamation. He who is faithful promises to hear them with perfect attentiveness. These "Three Ps" do not strengthen faith, but they are our response of faith to the grace we have received.

In prayer we come before our God with the desires and concerns that are on our minds and hearts. We speak to God words of thanks and praise for his grace shown to us in so many ways. As we close our prayers with "amen" we are declaring our trust that our faithful God hears those prayers and answers them. Amen simply means. "Yes, it shall be so!" Not only do we bow our heads in prayer, but we lift our voices in praise. Throughout our time of worship we raise our voices to God in the songs we sing or the words we speak praising him for the greatness of his glorious grace. As we raise our voices in praise together, we are also proclaiming the hope that we hold on to. Hymns declare so wondrously what God has done through Jesus. Creeds like the Apostles and Nicene confess our unity of faith declaring concisely what God's Word tells us and what it is we believe.

Worship is not just approaching God to receive grace, it is our response to God and his grace through our prayers, our praises, and our proclamation together. What a wonderful vertical conversation we are having with our God even now. However at the same time we are also participating in a horizontal conversation with those all around us when we gather together for worship. It is a conversation through which we are encouraging one another. **"Let us also consider carefully how to spur each other on to love and good works. Let us not neglect meeting together, as some have the habit of doing. Rather, let us encourage each other, and all the more as you see the Day approaching."** (vs. 24-25)

Spurs are used to stimulate, encourage, and motivate horses to move at the request of the rider. While those kinds of spurs may not be what the writer had in mind, the general principle is the same. As we gather together we spur, motivate, encourage each other towards love and good works. We are stimulating each other to live Christian lives out of love for God and for others in the world around us so that our lives reflect the grace God has shown us. Sometimes we need each other to spur us on and encourage us toward love and good deeds in our thoughts, words, and actions. Yet maybe we need another kind of encouragement.

We know the Day, Judgement Day, is coming. We are confident that when it comes we have heaven because of Jesus. However it isn't here yet. Sometimes while we wait we look around us and there are people in need of encouragement. They need that arm around their shoulder. You look around and it doesn't take too much to see people who are hurting, troubled, doubting, uncertain, or feeling alone. As we gather together for worship, we are encouraging each other, building them up, letting the hurting, the troubled, the doubting, the lonely know they are not alone. We put our arms around them with the encouraging Words of God's promises and assurances all in Jesus. Even when words are not spoken, just seeing each other here together offers that mutual encouragement.

As we gather for worship in whatever form that takes, that is what worship is. Worship is approaching God's throne of grace to receive grace through Word and Sacrament. Worship is confessing our hope through prayer, praise, and proclamation. Worship is mutual encouragement in the face of suffering and spurring each other on towards Christian lives of love and good works. Worship is what the Christian church does and gathers together to do.

Yet instead of making a habit of worshipping together, there are those who would make a habit of neglecting worshipping. That's what some of the Christians to whom the writer was writing were doing. A habit of neglect had crept into the congregation. We aren't told why, but understanding the context of the letter and the sinful nature, we can figure out some possibilities. Perhaps it was misplaced priorities as something else became more important to them than being around their brothers and sisters in the faith. Perhaps it was a loss of interest. The initial joy that burned like a flame when they came to faith was dimming to a smoking ember. Perhaps it was out of fear of persecution for their faith. Fear can be a powerful force in keeping people from doing something even if they understand how important it is.

How can we say that we are a church, an assembly of God's people, if it's people do not see the value of worship and long with joy to gather together for worship? My friends, brothers and sisters in Christ, we understand what worship is. We know the value of worship for ourselves and for those around us as we live in this dark world and see the Day of Judgment approaching. So instead of willful neglect, we long with joy to keep gathering together for worship as we are right now.

As First Lutheran Church has done for 150 years, let us continue to hear that invitation. "Oh, come let us worship!" Let us gladly approach God's throne of grace together to receive grace together. Let us hold on to our common hope and confess it together through prayer, praise, and proclamation. Let us continue to spur each other on towards love and good deeds and encourage each other waiting patiently for the approaching day of Christ's return. When that day comes we will be gathered in God's visible glorious presence not just with those who worshipped here right now, but all his saints in glory to worship him forever - our Lord and our Savior. Amen



