

This morning let's continue our study of the Early Church as described in the second chapter of Acts. Each Sunday during Lent, we are discussing a key characteristic of the Early Church to learn what we can apply here at High Desert. Last Sunday we discussed the Early Church's devotion to the reading and studying of God's Word. Now let's see how important it is for us to gather together each week in worship. Listen again to how the Apostle Luke describes the Early Church in verses 42 through 47 in the second chapter of Acts.

Read Acts 2:42-47

Have you ever wondered why we do what we do during our hour together each Sunday morning? You know stand up, sing, sit down, stand up, sit down, close your eyes, listen, fall asleep during the sermon, wake up and go home. There are many reasons why we come together on Sunday morning, one being to hear the Word of God. There was a young man who had just finished seminary and he came to preach at a small church. He told the congregation that one of the ways that the seminary students practiced speaking was to put a dozen marbles in their mouths. As they progressed, they were allowed to get rid of a marble every so often. When they lost all their marbles, they were ready to become preachers. Do I hear an "Amen?"

Did you hear what Luke wrote about the Early Church in verse 46: "Every day they continued to meet together in worship." Every day, not just when it was convenient for them, or when they felt good, or it fit their busy schedule, but at least every Sunday. They never forgot to visit the Lord's house. John Wesley said that "God knows nothing of solitary religion." There is no such thing as "Lone Ranger Christianity." Things happen when we come together. God's Spirit moves upon His worshipping people. Worship is a stairway on which there is movement in both directions: God comes to us, and we go to God. A place of worship should be of such character that it will be easy for us to find God and difficult for us to forget Him!

One day a pastor was visiting with a man who was a member of his church. But for no apparent reason, the man never attended worship services. When the pastor urged the man to come, he replied rather smugly that he could be just as good a Christian staying home as he could attending church. The two men happened to be sitting in front of an open fireplace in which coals were burning. The pastor took the shovel from beside the fireplace and picked out one of the hot live coals. He placed it on the hearth by itself.

That single coal, which had been fiery red when it was in the bed of burning coals, turned gray and began to cool off. Soon it lost all its glow and warmth. Then, without saying a word, the pastor picked up the cold piece of coal and placed it back in the midst of the live coals. Soon it was aglow again and began to give off heat once more. The silent little drama drove home the message. The delinquent church member dropped his head in shame and said: "Pastor, I will

see you in church Sunday morning.” It was God’s plan from the beginning that believers in the Lord Jesus Christ be joined together in spiritual fellowship, in a special kind of oneness. This was the basic characteristic of the church that was conceived in the heart of God long before the foundation of the world. We are created for fellowship.

The neighborhood bar is possibly the best counterfeit there is to the fellowship Christ wants to give His church. However, it’s a poor imitation, dispensing liquor instead of grace; escape instead of reality, but in a permissive, accepting, and inclusive fellowship. You can tell people your secrets and they usually don’t tell others or even want to. The bar flourishes not because people are alcoholics, but because God has put into the human heart the desire to know and be known, to love and be loved, and this is one of the reasons that we gather together in worship.

Another interesting similarity between a bar and the church is that people often go there looking for direction and guidance in life when they are faced with major decisions and problems. Unfortunately for a lot of people it’s like the old country song “Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places.” However, I have found that the best source of guidance and direction in life is and should be the church where the Word of God is proclaimed. The truth is that when you are at your wit’s end, you’ll find God lives there. We come here each week to be re-directed.

Have you ever heard of a football team that doesn’t practice during the week to prepare for the next game? Just like a team needs to gather each week to go over the plays, review the rules, and plan for the next game, so we as Christians need to meet weekly to stay focused on where God is leading us, to be aligned with His will, to be renewed, and to be redirected when we stray off the path. An old preacher once said that “there are two sides to the Gospel: there’s the believing side, and there’s the behaving side.” Worship prepares us for the behaving side.

Jesus clearly understood this when He told His disciples in John 15:5 - “I am the vine, you are the branches, he who abides in me and I in him bears much fruit, without me you can do nothing.” Jesus knew that He was about to leave His disciples, yet He told them “We must be together.” He realized that in the coming days, weeks and months, these men would be called on to produce an unheard of amount of fruit – enough fruit to turn the whole world upside down. And Jesus knew that to accomplish this they needed to stay connected to Him. And this is one of the most important aspects of worship, remaining connected to God. Only by being connected can we enjoy a rewarding friendship with Jesus Christ and live life as it was intended. Only by remaining connected to God can we live the life that He intended for us from the beginning.

For example, most of us know from experience that if we don’t maintain contact with family members and friends we grow farther from them, and in many cases, the bond and relationship

is eventually broken. The same is true in our relationship with God. If we don't make a habit of coming to worship Him each week, the distance between us and God can grow until we are lost. And the farther we get from God the more likely we are to chase after the modern day gods of wealth, material possessions, and recognition.

You know it's so easy to start drifting away from God. And believe me the devil is very subtle; he doesn't care what we worship, as long as it's not God. Our drifting can start with one small excuse, like I don't feel like going to church today, I'm tired, or I don't like the preacher, and then another excuse, until you become a stranger to God. And then you start realizing that there is no direction in your life or the path that you are taking is leading nowhere. Thus, there is no happiness, joy or purpose in your life. We become like the branches that Jesus discussed in John 15:6 - "If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers." We dry up and die spiritually, because we are separated from our true source of strength and guidance in life. Worship helps us align our lives with God's will for us; it gives us a sense of direction and purpose.

We also come to worship and praise God, not only with our presence, but with our voices. Someone has said that there are three books necessary for advancing the kingdom of God – the Bible, the checkbook and the hymn book. Hymns and songs teach and remind us of the biblical truths. Many of us can't remember anything about the sermons that we have heard during our lifetime, or let's be honest, even last Sunday, and yet almost all of us can remember the words of the hymns we sang decades ago. Singing puts life into worship; strengthens our faith and unites us as believers. Weekly worship keeps us attuned to God and aligned to His will for our lives.

We are also united at the Communion Table this morning; united with believers all over the world. Twice in our text Luke notes that the Early Church broke bread together. The Communion Table at which we will bless the elements in a few minutes stretches back in history to that first evening when Jesus took the bread and the cup and blessed them. And it also stretches forward into the future when we will all gather with fellow believers at the heavenly banquet. Worship reminds us that we are a community built and sustained around the remembrance and promises of Jesus Christ as symbolized in these gifts of bread and juice.

In addition to being a place where we can find fellowship and direction for daily life, the church also functions as the body of Christ. The Apostle Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 12 that we are the body of Christ. Within this passage is the calling of the Church. Jesus is no longer in the world in bodily form; therefore, if He wants something done in the world, He has to find someone to do it for Him. Thus, we are called to be the body of Christ, hands to do His work, feet to run His errands, ears to listen to a hurting heart, and a voice to speak for Him. Just as the human body is a vehicle by which a person expresses himself to the world around him, so

the body of Christ, the Church, is the vehicle on earth by which the Lord chooses to make Himself known to the world.

Now while I have used this illustration before, it highlights an essential reason why we gather in worship. Nestled in the Alps in Switzerland is a small remote village, with a castle and a church constructed out of stone that can only be reached by steps cut in the mountainside. The peculiar thing about this church is that it has no interior lighting system. One evening a visitor to the village heard the church bell ringing and saw people coming down the narrow streets, each carrying a quaint little bronze lamp. She approached one of the worshippers and asked: "Please, I am a stranger here, will you tell me why you are all carrying a lamp to church?"

The woman replied: "Why, yes, I would be happy to. Years ago a duke lived in that castle. He also built the church, and asked that each worshipper bring his own lamp." The traveler replied: "Doesn't that keep people from attending evening worship services?" "Oh, no, it works quite the opposite way. It is called the Church of the Lighted Lamps. Everybody that goes there makes it a little brighter, and when anybody is tempted to stay at home or go somewhere else, they remember that the dear old church needs everybody's lamp, and if your lamp isn't there, there is so much less light."

The same is true in this church and every one of God's churches. Jesus tells us in Matthew 5:14 that we are the light of the world. God needs each and every one of our lamps – our gifts, our presence, our service – to make this world a better place. Once a man came to the church building just as the benediction was being pronounced, he asked the usher: "Is the service over?" "No," the usher wisely replied, "the worship is over, but the service is just about to begin." Worship leads us into service. As stated in the bulletin, we "enter to worship," and "depart to serve." We are called to be Christ's church and His light to this world. Don't let your light be missing. May your light shine as brightly as it can for the Lord. You have come to worship this morning; you have come for direction in your life, to be re-directed according to God's will; you have come for fellowship; you have come hopefully to be inspired and energized for the coming week; now depart with the grace of God in service. Amen