

Acts 2:41-47 “Concerning Worship”

For the Easter season, we've been taking a look at how encountering the Risen Christ makes an impact on how we do things in church. So far we've considered fellowship, partnerships, and discipleship ... three very important aspects of our congregation's life, mission, and witness. And as far as our study of scripture goes, we've mostly been relating these considerations to times when the Risen Christ had direct, face-to-face contact with the disciples. In other words, we've been talking about how Jesus appeared *to* his disciples whether it's in a house or on the shore of a lake or walking along a road. But Jesus told his disciples that there would be a time when he'd stop appearing *to* them, and start appearing *among* them, and even manifesting *through* them. That's when we see a big shift in the Bible as far as how the mission of Jesus is carried out. That's when we see the Holy Spirit at work. “Yeah, but that's what Pentecost is about, right? Aren't we supposed to wait 'til May 20th before we start talking about that?” So I'm a little impatient. But I've said just about all I wanted to say about Jesus appearing *to* people. I don't think that's *nearly* as exciting or important as when we start seeing Jesus working *through* his followers. Plus I'm probably getting a little excited about the Acts Bible Study that's coming up in a couple of weeks.

So this week we're considering “worship.” Jerry read two scriptures this morning ... one from Acts 2, which we usually reserve for Pentecost and one from Colossians 3, a letter Paul wrote to a cluster of churches while he was in prison. Acts gives us a picture of what was already happening among Jesus' followers, and Colossians shows us what Paul wanted Jesus' followers to be doing. As far as how this relates to our consideration of worship, think of it this way – The Book of Acts gives us “things to do” and Colossians gives us “attitudes to have.”

So when I say “worship,” what's the first thing you think of? Sunday morning! That's how we label this time in our bulletin, our newsletter, our website, our FaceBook Page, our YouTube Channel, ads in the

newspapers ... everything we put “out there.” When we say, “worship” we mean this time and place right here and now. Plus early service except on fifth Sundays and summer-time. Some people say, “It’s when we go to church” even though they may come to church for other things throughout the week. We’ll say, “I missed you in church last week!” Now you may have come to a bible study or a dinner or a service group or some other meeting during the week, but when a person says, “I missed you in church,” that usually means Sunday morning in what we call the “worship service.”

I’ve got some experience with worship services. As I’ve said before, I didn’t grow up in the church, but I’ve been to a lot of different worship services in a variety of churches. The first one I remember was when I was attending Sunday School at Olivet Baptist Church. I had friends who went there. I heard good stories. I got to play around with flannel boards which for me was like laying out panels on a comic book page. I *loved* it! I got prizes for memorizing scripture. I really had a good thing going. Then I was invited to attend worship. Sure, why not? I was there for Sunday School already, so I might as well see what else the church had to offer. And let me tell you, this “worship thing” was a different game altogether. The songs in that service weren’t *nearly* as catchy or fun as the ones we sang in Sunday School. The preacher didn’t present a Bible story and say, “Let’s talk about this” like we did in Sunday School. It was more like, “I want to tell you what’s wrong with the world and what’s wrong with *you*. And furthermore, I’ve got a couple dozen scripture verses without context from the Old *and* New Testaments to scare you back on the straight and narrow.” So that’s worship, huh? Wow. That’s when I took an 8 year break from church.

Now later, after I came to faith and started looking around for a church, I found some worship services that were exciting! The songs they sang were better than even the catchiest Sunday School or Vacation Bible School songs! The preachers still had the “here’s what’s wrong with the world” vibe, but they talked a lot about heaven too! That was cool. And not only did they have Sunday *morning* worship, they had Sunday and

Wednesday *evening* worship services too! Might as well check those out! But when I went to one of the evening worship services, I was a little confused, because in the middle of the service, someone stood up and started speaking in a language that I didn't understand. I heard that Catholic churches had some of their services in Latin, but this church didn't seem anything like a Catholic church, and it sure didn't sound like Latin to me! I was told these folks were "speaking in tongues." And that was fine and dandy. More power to 'em. Where I got in trouble was during the preaching. There was this visiting preacher who started in on the hell thing again which reminded me of my previous experience at Olivet. At least I was back in familiar territory. But he started talking about how sinners who didn't repent had a "death-odor." He was preaching about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, which I liked because he was at least sticking with one story and not just looking all over the Bible for verses that proved his point. But he kept on saying "death odor" over and over in a way that you couldn't help but laugh. Okay, *I* couldn't help but laugh. And I'm one of those people who can't stifle a laugh if I think something is funny. In fact, the more I try to stifle it, the worse it gets and the more explosive it comes out of me when I can't hold it in anymore. And I, of course, always want to share the fun, so I wrote a note to the young woman sitting next to me. It went something like, "If this guy wants to know what a 'death odor' is, he should talk to me about a half-hour after I've had Taco Bell." That got her to laughing too. And it worked its way down the pew from there. So much for that worship experience. Death *odor* wasn't the issue anymore, it was the death *glares* I was getting from folks in the church including the preacher.

Over time, I learned to appreciate the variety of worship services in different churches. Some things I liked. Other things I didn't. I always thought it would be fun to take all the elements I liked best from each service and sew it all together. But that wouldn't be fair because some of the things I didn't particularly like, were very meaningful to others. That's the beauty of worship. One size or style doesn't fit all. But the other thing I learned over time is that worship doesn't just happen on

Sunday morning. And it doesn't just happen in chairs or pews. And it doesn't always happen with musical instruments. And it doesn't always happen in a group of people either. In our passage from Acts, Luke, the writer laid out what the first Christians were doing as acts of worship. For those early Christians, worship included teaching, breaking bread, fellowship and prayer.

The teaching was passed on from the original disciples who followed Jesus during his earthly ministry. These were the eleven, plus one they recruited, who were sent by Jesus to make other disciples like we talked about last week. They told the stories of Jesus from their perspective. They read the Law and Prophets and explained how those sacred texts prepared the way for Jesus' message. And these eyewitness accounts of his parables, his sayings, his miracles and the character he embodied got passed on from person to person, then community to community. And when new people joined their community, they were baptized.

When they gathered together, they participated in a meal that was usually called a "Love Feast" or "The Lord's Table." This is where rich and poor, slave and free, male and female, Jew or Gentile, city folk, country folk and everyone else could come together and be equals. Most of the time, these were actual meals rather than the crackers and juice that we typically have during communion. Still, they would recite the words Jesus said about the broken bread being his body given for us, and the wine being his blood shed for our sins. They were reminded that he never stopped loving them, even to the point of his death which caused them to stop and say, "If he could forgive the ones who killed him, he could also forgive us for our old habits and ways.

They participated in fellowship and sharing. They shared their testimonies about how God was working in their lives and how God remained faithful to them through their joys and sorrows, fears and failures. It was during this time that they would gather an offering to distribute to those who were in need ... especially widows and orphans.

Finally, they practiced prayer. Some prayers were requests. Some were of adoration. Some were of confession. Some were of thanksgiving. They lifted up their needs and sorrows, they lifted up their leaders so that they would turn from injustice and violence and practice justice and peace. They prayed for wisdom and courage to proclaim Jesus' message. They even prayed for their enemies.

In Colossians, Paul passed on some wisdom about the attitude that should accompany our worship. He told his readers to practice compassion, kindness, humility, patience and gentleness. He told them to bear one another's burdens. Forgive each other as Jesus forgives us. Love each other. Be "of one body." He even told them that in addition to teaching one another, sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. And in everything ... word and deed alike, do it in the name of Jesus.

That's when I realized that *anything* we do can be an act of worship. Worship isn't just about meeting on Sunday to sing, pray, take communion, and listen to preaching. It can happen any time of any day through multiple actions. Because when we've seen the glory of God, the love of God, the wisdom of God, the goodness of God, the power of God, the kindness of God, and the fullness of God, how can we *not* worship?