

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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Discipleship Series
Revelation 4:1-11; Acts 2:37-42

Staying Fit with Weekly Worship

I would like to begin this morning by stating a core belief that is central to what it means to be a Christian. I do this so that we'll all be on the same page as we proceed today into our continued emphasis this fall on discipleship. And to make this statement I turn to the words of the Bible, in this case in the words of Jesus as recorded in the New Testament book of John. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." (Jn. 3:16) This succinct sentence captures the essence of what we as Christians believe. And it also serves as the basis or foundation to how we live our lives as Christians. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

Over the 2000 years that have passed since this one-sentence statement of faith was first uttered, tens of thousands of pages have been written by Bible scholars and theologians setting forth the beliefs and assertions of the Christian faith. And although whether it be a multi-volume treatise systematically organizing Christian theology, or a catechism that summarizes Christian belief in an extended series of questions and answers, at the core of it all is this simple and yet profound statement. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

What is so pointed in this statement is that it addresses the basic human need to understand our lives in light of the fact that we are all going to die someday. In one way or another all of the religions of the world try to make sense of the human reality that once we are born we are on the path to our eventual death. So making sense of that life trajectory and our destiny that lies beyond are basic religious questions. As Christians we affirm that because of God's love, made perfect in the life of Jesus, God's son, God has transformed our physical death so that it is no longer our endpoint and has eliminated an endpoint at all infinitely in the eternal life that is ours who simply accept and believe it to be true. Because of God's love for us and our accepting Jesus as our savior, our eternal destiny is with God.

A one-word summary of this one-sentence summary of Christian theology is "grace." At the heart of the Christian religion is the grace of God. Not due to anything we do or say, God has given us life and life eternal through Jesus. This simple truth is profound while at the same time it is counter to how we may live our lives.

We live in a culture of cause and effect transactions. If I want to obtain food, I first do some sort of work in which I earn some money that then is used to purchase the food. If I want to get a better job, I use some of the money I have earned to pay for the education or training I need in order to be qualified for that better job. Put quite simply, for each thing I want in life, there is a price to pay, that when paid entitles me to that which I want. That's the transactional nature of our world.

So we bring this transactional mind set to church with us. The cause and effect transactions of our daily mundane living and our desire for God's love and grace can trick

us into believing that there are certain things we must do or steps that we must take in order to earn God's love and consequent eternal life. But the truth of God's grace is that it is God's gift of Jesus, pure and simple, that sets us right with God and that results in our being in God's realm, God's presence, for eternity.

In the book of Acts we read about the first generation of Christians, those who were either eye-witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, or who had heard about it from eye-witnesses. Their lives were changed by this resurrection of Jesus and they knew that Jesus' resurrection was for them and for those who would follow after them. They were bound together in the common experience of knowing God's grace in their lives. The fellowship that they had with one another included praying together and eating together on a daily basis. Their faith was so strengthened that they became winsome witnesses to others around them, many of whom joined them in this new experience and expression of faith. There are a couple of things we can learn from those first-century Christians.

So overwhelmed were these first Christians by the awesome love of God, the love that accepted them without condition, that they found themselves overwhelmed with the motivation to express their gratitude to God for this gift of grace. In learning, in praying, in singing and in encouraging one another they did this in what we would call worship. Worship for them was their expression of acknowledging the gift of salvation from God and outdoing themselves in their expression of gratitude to God for this gift.

Because Jesus rose from the dead on Sunday, the first day of the week, the early Christian church adopted Sunday as the day set aside for the focused worship of God. What for their Jewish predecessors had been the Sabbath, beginning on Friday at sundown lasting until sundown on Saturday, set aside for worship, the early Christians changed this day of rest and worship to Sunday and adopted it as the Christian Sabbath. So even though the early Christians worshiped God every day, especially every time they sat down for a meal together, Sunday became a special day of focused devotion and worship.

Worship was the regular occasion to remember what God had done for them, and it renewed their relationship to God and it renewed their relationship to one another, strengthening their common bond as disciples of Jesus—brothers and sisters in Christ.

Thanks to the nurture from generation to generation, stretching all the way from that first century Christian church to today, we're the recipients of the same good news of God's grace that bonded the early Christians one to another as well as to God. What we have been entrusted with by those who have gone before us is no less than the stewardship of the truth of God's grace for the world today and for those yet to come into it. If we're to be faithful in that stewardship we have no option but to continue in that which has nurtured and sustained the faith to this day—regular, frequent worship in the assembly of God's people. It's the reason that we gather for worship here every Sunday—week after week, month after month, year after year. In this congregation's 137 year history the people of First Presbyterian Church have gathered for weekly worship over 7,100 times. I'm certain that the number of Sundays that this congregation didn't gather to worship can be counted on the fingers of one hand, those Sundays being missed because of severe blizzards and dangerously frigid temperatures.

This is why in our renewed emphasis on discipleship this fall we're focusing on 6 marks of discipleship that Pastor Michael Foss has identified for Christians who are serious about faith (*Power Surge: Six Marks of Discipleship for a Changing Church*, Fortress Press, 2000). The 6 are PRAY daily, which Jody spoke about last Sunday (remember the green dots?); WORSHIP weekly, our focus today; the other 4 on which we'll focus in the next 4 weeks are, READ the Bible, SERVE at and beyond the local church, be in RELATIONSHIP to encourage spiritual growth in others, and GIVE of my time, talents and resources.

If we desire to be serious about our faith, then our daily praying individually will be coupled with our weekly worshipping together with others in the faith.

My theology professor in seminary, John E. Burkhart, wrote a book that he titled simply, *Worship*. (*Worship: A Searching Examination of the Liturgical Experience*, Westminster Press, 1982) In this little book he makes a compelling case that worship is our response as Christians to what God has done and continues to do. He makes clear that worship is something that we do together. It is not something done to us or for us. It is something that we do for God. This is why he would say that the comment made by some that "I just don't get much out of worship," betrays a misunderstanding of worship. The question that we should always be asking ourselves when we worship is, "What is God getting from me, from us, when we worship?" For God is the object of worship and the recipient of what arises from it and out of it.

How can we adequately thank God for the amazing gift given to us in Jesus—the gift of everlasting life—salvation? Weekly worship provides us a regular opportunity to make that offering of thanks to God a part of the rhythm of our lives. When worship is part of our weekly rhythm we are more likely to remember who we are in relationship to God and to one another. When we worship weekly we're more likely to remember that our salvation is a gift, pure and simple, a gift that we call grace. We're more likely to be able to resist letting the transactional nature of almost all of our other relationships of life cloud or obscure our understanding of our relationship to God and the salvation offered us. When we worship together weekly our relationships with other Christians—with one another—will become mature and nurturing where we learn from one another, caring for and supporting one another. When we worship weekly, we're making a clear proclamation to those around us that our faith commitment is our paramount priority, not equal to any of the other commitments in our lives.

The book of Revelation, that last book in the Bible is unlike any other in the New Testament. In it we read of a heavenly vision given by God to an early Christian named John. When we read its vivid imagery, we are transported into another realm. Such is the case in the 4th chapter where we get a glimpse of what might be found in heaven. And what do we find in this 4th chapter but a vision of those assembled in heaven around the throne of God offering continuous praise and honor and glory. This worship that knows no earthly time constraints makes clear that there is no amount of worship, no extent of worship, no lavishness of worship that is too much. For how indeed can we or the heavenly hosts ever repay God for the gift that goes into eternity itself?

If you ever thumb through the hymnal looking for allusions to Scripture, you will find that many of the great hymns of our faith draw upon the strange and yet magnificent

imagery in Revelation. Such is the case in the hymn with which we will close our service today. When we do that, think of it as our presentation to God in response to the amazing grace we have been given.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” How can we even begin to thank God for this gift? Weekly worship now seems just the beginning!

To Jesus Christ, who loves us
and freed us from our sins by his blood
and made us to be a kingdom,
priests of his God and Father,
to him be glory and dominion forever and ever.
Amen. (Rev. 1:5, 6)