

## “How-to’s of Covenant Life: Presence – Time with God”

September 14, 2014

Fall Series

This passage from Luke is often forgotten. It’s the only Gospel story of Jesus as young person. It’s the first time we hear Jesus speak in the Gospel of Luke. I didn’t hear much about it growing up other than “Jesus teaching in the temple.” Now it I’m amazed, surprised, and usually pretty compassionate when it comes to Mary’s reaction to young Jesus. “Where were you? How could you leave us? We’ve been looking for you! You scared us!”

And then I get caught off guard with Jesus’ reply to her. Is this Jesus in all of his humanity - the snarky teen? Or it is Jesus showing us the importance of worship, of teaching and learning in the church, of growing spiritually with others? Is it Jesus growing in wisdom and stature reminding Mary and Joseph of what they’ve already been told - that he is Messiah? “Didn’t you know where I’d be? I have to do my Father’s work.”

The question about church attendance is less serious than in years past, but there’s a revival when it comes to being together as the Christian community. Gatherings like Unity Christian Music Festival or the Muskegon Methodist Men are intentional times and places when folks get together as the Christian community. It’s not just about going to church now, but it’s really about being the church. The church exists for those who aren’t here yet. And still that question of going to church is real.

When we say that we commit to follow Jesus Christ, when we put our faith and trust in him, then we also promise to live like he lived. We promise to support the Body of Christ with our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. Presence means showing up, but that’s the minimum.

Worship is the first way we give God glory because we recognize that God is worthy of our praise and thanksgiving. Maybe most importantly in our culture, God is worthy of our time. How do you show love to someone? There’s an element of time involved – spending time at a kid’s game, talking over dinner, calling on the phone, writing a card, paying a visit. Just like showing love to someone, showing our love for God costs. It takes effort and energy. Worship is a priority.

And it’s clear that from the beginning, being in worship, being with others who were seeking God was important to Jesus. He was a faithful Jew. His parents were faithful Jews. Going to Jerusalem was part of living their faith. Making that pilgrimage

was a sacrifice - probably at least 4-5 days each trip. And they traveled with others who were making the journey. That's why Mary and Joseph don't notice that Jesus isn't with them. They assume he's with the larger group - with others whom they trust. And yet, he goes to the temple - his Father's house.

I'll be honest. My home church still feels like home to me. It's familiar and comforting. My memories are tied to the place and the space. My family worshipped together. I was baptized as an infant. I made my personal commitment to follow Jesus when I was confirmed. I spent time with my friends at youth group. I first experienced a call to ministry. I love my home church, but I'm glad it's not the same. There are new people - people I don't know! There are new ministries. The building has changed.

I think of other places and spaces where I was present and where God was present: camp, college campus ministry, seminary, and now all of those places where I show up and God is already present. I hope we offer presence because we have to. God wants our time given willingly and joyfully. How much would we miss if we didn't show up? Who would be missing us if we didn't show up?

There's a story you may have heard before. I don't know if it's made up or if it really happened, but it's a powerful illustration.

There was a small country church and the pastor was a caring shepherd of his people. He noticed that one man had recently stopped coming to the church and decided to pay him a visit.

It was the dead of winter and as he was welcomed into the man's house the fire was burning bright, with many hot coals underneath.

The two men did not have a conversation, but sat in companionable silence.

The pastor picked up the tongs, took one of the hot coals and separated it from the rest of the fire. Slowly the coal went dark and then black and cold. The pastor picked up the coal again and put it back in the fire, where again it became red. Not long after he departed, no further words apart from small talk being spoken.

The next Sunday the man was back in church, and never left again.

Apparently many years later he thanked the pastor for the best sermon he ever preached, where he did not even say a single word. We must continue in fellowship to grow as Christians it is something that is not an option, for if we don't we surely will not grow and our love will slowly grow cold.

I've heard it before. I don't have to go to church to be a Christian. That's true, but I don't know how we grow in faith, how we find the ground of our hope, and how we keep on being challenged to love as Jesus loves if we don't gather together. I don't know how we expect to make disciples if we're not learning together and growing together. I don't know how we can transform the world if we're not being transformed.

Now I expect that I'm preaching to the choir today. Obviously, you're here. We're here. Worshipping with others is a choice we made today. Time is a precious gift that we have, and when we offer it to God, it matters. When we offer it to each other, it matters.

My goal isn't to guilt any one of us. That won't work. But I'm challenged to think about all of the people I know who choose not to go to church - for whatever reason. They are my family members, my dear friends, my neighbors, my co-workers. I don't know all of their reasons, but I know that we don't just come to church for ourselves. We come so that we can be strengthened and encouraged to share love and hope with others. We experience God's grace and God's grace through through others.

All of us know people and love people who have no church home. Maybe there are people you know who are asking questions about faith and God. Maybe they've told you how lost they feel and how they're searching for something. Maybe they've been hurt in the church and find it hard to come back. How might we invite them to come to worship? How can we invite with intentionality and hospitality - being a friend who sits with them? How we can share the importance of presence with others so that they might accept the invitation?

Just as prayer cultivates our relationship with God, so does offering our presence. Yes, we can worship God anywhere, but Scripture leads us to corporate worship - being together and celebrating God's faithfulness. Being together as the Body of Christ reminds us of the needs of the wider world. While we might be full of joy and peace, one of us might be grieving and struggling. While we might be full of worries, someone else might be the one to reassure us of God's presence and power. A friend of mine said that he knew it was important for him to be in worship - to offer his presence - for himself. But he hadn't ever thought that someone else in the church might need him to be there, too. Think of it! Someone might need your encouragement, your prayers, your kind word.

Friends, some of you have heard the phrase "radical hospitality." And you'll hear more in the weeks ahead as we seek to amp it up here. How do we welcome all - no

matter their age, nationality, circumstance, attitude, situation, experience with the church? How do we open our arms as wide as God does? As we think about offering our presence, how will we create a place where everyone's presence is welcomed, invited, and celebrated - without any exceptions? How will we - for the sake of Jesus Christ?

I wouldn't be here in this church - and certainly not preaching - if it wasn't for the Body of Christ. It wasn't just my parents, but the whole church who took the responsibility and kept their promises to nurture me in faith: nursery folks, Sunday School teachers, choir leaders, musicians, pastors, youth group leaders, camp counselors, and all of the people who loved me and cared - and knew my name. They shared their gifts for the glory of God and called out gifts in me that I didn't know I had.

Friends, our presence here together in worship is vital. Our presence with one another in Christian education classes and small groups is vital. Jesus was with others as we grew up, and he continued to be with others as he ministered to others. He was not alone! Time with God was a priority for him in prayer and in community. It can be no less for you and me.

Worship helps us find our center and focus for life. Sometimes we're comforted. Sometimes we're convicted. Always we're reminded that we live in God's presence all the time, and we can offer God our presence and our time. And we're reminded in Psalm 46 that offering our time to God gives us much-needed perspective. "Be still, and know that I am God."

And in worship we experience the miracle and wonder of God's grace. When we worship, God's amazing grace forgives our sin, purifies our hearts, helps us to glimpse the mind of Christ and empowers our hands to serve others. When we worship, the hope is that we move closer to and become more like Jesus.

For anyone who has ever worked on a potter's wheel, you know that if the clay isn't centered properly, you can't use it. You have to start over. And the same is true. If we aren't centered and focused on God, how can we be truly open and ready for God to use us, to show us which way to go, to lead and guide us through each day?

Hold up your ping pong ball. What will you do? Will you make time? And will you invite others to make time so that they can find grace, peace, and joy? Friends, may we love God and love our neighbor.

Thanks be to God. Amen!