

Liturgical Day: The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Date: October 15, 2006

Sermon Title: Weekly Time with God's People

The Lutheran church is a liturgical church. What that means is that in most Lutheran churches, worship is shaped by a set of expectations that have developed over the centuries. To a certain degree, the wisdom of the ages helps determine what we do when we gather for worship, and how we do it. The hymns we sing. The prayers we pray. The lessons we read. The furnishings in this room. The roles worship leaders play. Each of these components is influenced by our church's worship traditions – and that is what it means to be a liturgical church.

That was our focus on Friday and Saturday, as we gathered for the most recent "Our Life Together in Christ" retreat. It was, once again, a great retreat. I'm thankful for the testimonies I heard from our presenters, and encouraged by the conversations that participants had throughout the retreat. If you haven't yet attended one of these, I'd strongly encourage you to do so the next time one comes up on the calendar. It makes sense to study the liturgical traditions of our church and how they touch us, because that is one of the more visible aspects of what it means to be a Lutheran.

I think – and this is my bias, I'll admit – but I think it makes sense to study liturgy for another reason. I believe that humans are liturgical by nature. We prefer a certain order and structure to our corporate experiences. It helps us know what to expect. It allows us to focus in on the moments that tend to be most meaningful to us. That doesn't mean that changes aren't helpful from time to time. Innovation can keep our experience of liturgy fresh and compelling. But you can't overestimate the power of liturgy – the power of having a proscribed method, and a proscribed set of reasons for doing things a certain way.

I recently participated in a remarkable liturgy – one that had a surprisingly profound effect on the entire assembly. This group had prepared for their time together well during the preceding week. They had read and studied everything they could get their hands on – everything that related to what they would do and experience when they were together. There was extensive conversation during the week before, throughout the entire community, about what would happen, what role each person would play, and what their individual expectations were. By the time the hour arrived, you could tell that they were so excited to be together – and so certain that something remarkable was about to take place. You could see it in their eyes. You could even hear it in their enthusiastic comments beforehand.

Then the liturgy began. I could tell right away that there were certain traditions and customs that shaped their assembly – right down to where they parked their cars, and the seats that they chose before it all began. They were dressed in liturgical colors – the leaders up front of course, but in this case, the entire assembly wore garments that reflected the theme of the day. Some came early to prepare themselves for the gathering, and others straggled in late after it had begun (in that way it was quite a bit like being at Saint Peter on a Sunday morning...). Certain words were spoken. The assembly sang a hymn together (although not everybody sang – some just stood and listened). There were lights, and sounds, and carefully orchestrated movement, and you could literally feel the emotions of the assembly swelling... *as Jason Elam placed the ball on the tee and prepared to send the opening kick-off towards the visiting Baltimore Ravens.*

You might find it strange to think of professional football in terms of liturgy. But consider the parallels between a liturgical worship service and a professional football game. There are any number of customs and traditions that address what one wears,

FIRST LESSON

ACTS 2:37-47

GOSPEL LESSON

ST. LUKE 2:41-52

PRAYER OF THE DAY

**ALMIGHTY GOD, YOU
POUR OUT ON ALL WHO
DESIRE IT THE SPIRIT OF
GRACE AND
SUPPLICATION. DELIVER
US, AS WE COME INTO
YOUR PRESENCE, FROM
COLD HEARTS AND
WANDERING THOUGHTS,
THAT WITH STEADY MINDS
AND BURNING ZEAL WE
MAY WORSHIP YOU IN
SPIRIT AND TRUTH;
THROUGH YOUR SON,
JESUS CHRIST OUR
LORD. AMEN.**

9300 E. BELLEVIEW AVE.
GREENWOOD VILLAGE,
COLORADO 80111

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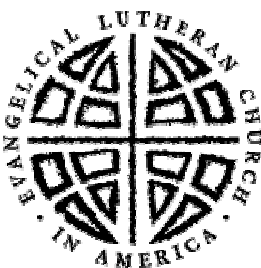
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how one prepares, where one sits, what words and actions begin the time together and which ones bring it to a close... And during the service or the game, there are predictable patterns of who will do what and when. [There even are liturgical responses. When the opposing team attempts a pass play but fails, the announcer says, "The pass is..." and the congregation responds: "In-com-plete!"

I've always been convinced that these two experiences are closer to one another than one might first imagine, and that was quite apparent to me this past Monday night.

But what really struck me was the participation of the fans. All week long, many of them had been listening to the radio coverage, reading the sports page, calling in to talk shows, and visiting around the water cooler about what the odds of a Bronco's victory might be. There was an emotional investment – and emotional fervor that grew throughout the week, and was at a fevered pitch by Monday night. They dressed themselves up for the occasion, many wearing a team jersey with their favorite player's name and number prominently displayed. Some wore blue wigs. Some had large Broncos tattoos on their arms or legs. A certain amount of adult beverage was consumed, which fueled some of the passion that evening. And a considerable investment was made in tickets, transportation, refreshments, clothing, and the like.

What I found fascinating was that by the time the game began, many of these fans were absolutely whipped up into a frenzy. They were so pumped – so psyched for the game – that even marginal success on the part of the Broncos would have made it a powerful experience. And most of them arrived at the stadium, absolutely certain that it was going to be a very exciting time.

Now I've seen exactly the opposite scenario. You have to remember that I spent fourteen years in the Phoenix area – and for many of those years we followed the trials and travails of a rather lackluster Arizona Cardinals football team. Fans showed up at the stadium, nearly certain that the home team would get a good thrashing. They developed a certain animosity for the team's owner, and even a sort of perverse hopefulness that he would be unsuccessful. Consequently, an evening in Sun Devil Stadium was not the kind of exciting experience that I've seen here in Bronco country.

It is interesting, isn't it? Two different crowds could observe the same football game, but because one was so caught up in it, they would experience it in a much more powerful way.

What if our hour together in this room each Sunday was more like a Broncos game than a Cardinals game? What if people spent time all week long reading and studying and working to understand the nuances of what is possible when we are together? What if there were talk radio stations where we could call in and offer our best guesses of what the Pastor might say, or how the choir (the band) might sound, or which prayers would be most moving? What if there were entire sections of the local newspaper on Sunday morning, dedicated to exploring the texts for the weekend, and offering theological insights that relate to current events that might be lifted up in the church's prayers?

What if God's people were as passionate about preparing themselves for the weekend's service as Bronco fans are about preparing themselves for the weekend's game.

What if? I'll tell you what if. I'm convinced the likelihood that God will touch our hearts during worship on any given weekend is based far more on what we expect than what we experience. Good sermons certainly help. Strong music makes a difference. Well-prepared and thoughtful worship leaders get us a step or two closer to where we need to be. But the bottom line is this: those of us who expect God to make something remarkable happen in worship, and who prepare ourselves for that possibility, are those who are much more likely to be touched by our time together with God.

The second of our *Five Habits of Discipleship* is to worship with God's people every week. Notice what I said. I didn't say it was to show up once a week. I didn't say it was to keep a seat warm on Sunday morning. I said it is to worship once a week. To show up well-prepared, and ready to meet God – expecting that the remarkable is bound to happen. And the more of us who show up with that frame of mind, the more often we'll notice what God is up to during our times of worship – the more often our hearts will be touched.

I'd like to turn your attention to the *Habits of the Heart* booklet that is before you. (If you don't have one, please raise your hands and we'll get one to you.) Take a few moments with the reflection questions, and

jot down on page seven a few notes about how you are connecting with the habit of weekly worship, and what sort of changes you might like to make in the months to come.

[Provide time for the congregation to make a few notes in the Habits of the Heart booklet.]

Thank you for doing that this morning. I am hopeful that our focus on these discipleship habits will allow God to help us to grow in some new and exciting ways. I encourage you to be making plans for how you will strengthen your attention to discipleship in 2007 – plans that we can celebrate at worship the morning of Noember 12th.

Let me leave you with these questions – two of the questions that you'll find on page 7 of your "Habits of the Heart" booklet:

QUESTION OF THE DAY:

How can I increase my sense of expectancy at worship? How can I prepare myself so that God's word is more likely to touch my heart?

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (October 15, 2006)

English Text:

⁴¹ Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. ⁴² And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. ⁴³ When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. ⁴⁴ Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. ⁴⁵ When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. ⁴⁶ After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷ And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸ When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." ⁴⁹ He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" ⁵⁰ But they did not understand what he said to them. ⁵¹ Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. ⁵² And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor. ⁱ

Greek Text:

⁴¹ Καὶ ἐπορεύοντο οἱ γονεῖς αὐτοῦ κατὰ ἔτος εἰς Ἱερουσαλήμ τῆ ἑορτῆ τοῦ πάσχα. ⁴² Καὶ ὅτε ἐγένετο ἐτῶν δώδεκα, ἀναβαινόντων αὐτῶν κατὰ τὸ ἔθος τῆς ἑορτῆς ⁴³ καὶ τελειωσάντων τὰς ἡμέρας, ἐν τῷ ὑποστρέφειν αὐτοὺς ὑπέμεινεν Ἰησοῦς ὁ παῖς ἐν Ἱερουσαλήμ, καὶ οὐκ ἔγνωσαν οἱ γονεῖς αὐτοῦ. ⁴⁴ νομίσαντες δὲ αὐτὸν εἶναι ἐν τῇ συνοδίᾳ ἦλθον ἡμέρας ὁδὸν καὶ ἀνεζήτησαν αὐτὸν ἐν τοῖς συγγενεῦσιν καὶ τοῖς γνωστοῖς, ⁴⁵ καὶ μὴ εὐρόντες ὑπέστρεψαν εἰς Ἱερουσαλήμ ἀναζητοῦντες αὐτόν. ⁴⁶ καὶ ἐγένετο μετὰ ἡμέρας τρεῖς εὗρον αὐτὸν ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ καθεζόμενον ἐν μέσῳ τῶν διδασκάλων καὶ ἀκούοντα αὐτῶν καὶ ἐπερωτῶντα αὐτούς. ⁴⁷ ἔξιستانτο δὲ πάντες οἱ ἀκούοντες αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ τῇ συνέσει καὶ ταῖς ἀποκρίσεσιν αὐτοῦ. ⁴⁸ καὶ ἰδόντες αὐτὸν ἐξεπλάγησαν, καὶ εἶπεν πρὸς αὐτὸν ἡ μήτηρ αὐτοῦ τέκνον, τί ἐποίησας ἡμῖν οὕτως; ἰδοὺ ὁ πατήρ σου καγῶ ὀδυνώμενοι ἐζητοῦμεν σε. ⁴⁹ καὶ εἶπεν πρὸς αὐτούς· τί ὅτι ἐζητεῖτε με; οὐκ ᾔδειτε ὅτι ἐν τοῖς τοῦ πατρός μου δεῖ εἶναι με; ⁵⁰ καὶ αὐτοὶ οὐ συνήκαν τὸ ῥήμα ὃ ἐλάλησεν αὐτοῖς. ⁵¹ καὶ κατέβη μετὰ αὐτῶν καὶ ἦλθεν εἰς Ναζαρεθ καὶ ἦν ὑποτασσόμενος αὐτοῖς. καὶ ἡ μήτηρ αὐτοῦ διετήρει πάντα τὰ ῥήματα ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτῆς. ⁵² Καὶ Ἰησοῦς προέκοπτεν [ἐν τῇ] σοφίᾳ καὶ ἡλικίᾳ καὶ χάριτι παρὰ θεῶν καὶ ἀνθρώπων. ⁱⁱ

October 15: *Weekly Time with God's People* St. Luke 2:41-52

A new pastor in a mid-sized town wanted to get to know the people of his community better so he established the habit of eating at the local diner once a week to visit with the regulars who gathered there. One day, about a year or so after he arrived in town, he began talking with a man. The pastor introduced himself, and mentioned that he was the new pastor over at First Church. The man responded: "I know that. I'm a member of your congregation." The pastor was a bit taken back, and said: "You are? I don't believe I've ever seen you at worship." The man's response: "I said I was a member, not a fanatic."

We may live in a day when weekly worship is interpreted as a sign of fanaticism, but in all truth, regular worship has been the standard for most of Christianity's history. In the early days of the church, St. Luke tells us, the faithful gathered each day for worship, study and fellowship:

Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. [Acts 2:46-47]

In the early days of our Lutheran movement, Martin Luther and his colleagues would gather daily for Holy Communion. In the Large Catechism, Luther wrote:

The Lord's Supper is given as a daily food and sustenance so that our faith may refresh and strengthen itself and not weaken in the struggle, but grow continually stronger. [Book of Concord, Large Catechism, 5:24]

Luther was even bold enough to suggest that anyone who didn't desire to receive the sacrament as often as it was offered might not truly be a Christian! [5:42, same as above]

A disciple of Jesus Christ is one who makes **regular worship** with God's people a central component in the rhythm of life. It is in worship that:

- We hear the words of absolution as if coming from God's own voice.
- Christ meets us in word and meal.
- The promises of our baptism are reaffirmed.
- We join together with our brothers and sisters in faith, and offer ourselves to God – that we might be instruments of love and grace and renewal for others.

The place of worship in faith communities has received much attention lately. Churches across our nation are asking how to create worship services that will attract and inspire and enlighten. In our tradition, we approach worship from a different perspective. Rather than ask what the worshipper can get from a service, we prefer to ask what the worshipper can give to make the service complete. The primary reason to worship is to join our hearts and voices in thanks and praise to the God who has done so much for us. Sure, there will be times when we are inspired and enlightened – but worship is not primarily about what we get from showing up, it is about what we give to God, as a sign of our intent to give the whole of our lives. To that end, Saint Peter's worship is not fully what it can be unless each one of us is there.

At Saint Peter, we invite you to join us in developing habits of discipleship in your life. Will you join us in committing to weekly worship with God's people?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

What does the habit of weekly worship look like in a believer's life? Those who have grown in this area realize that to worship in a way that fills the soul and empowers the believer for discipleship means more than simply showing up on a Sunday morning. Strong worship demands preparation. And so we spend the week leading up to Sunday studying the appointed lessons for the day. We decline to stay up late on Saturday evenings, realizing that strong worship requires fresh minds and eager hearts. We rise early enough on Sundays so that our preparations aren't rushed and chaotic, and we arrive at church relaxed and ready to meet God. We enter into the worship area with reverence and expectation, trusting that our hearts will be touched. We reflect on our worship experience, both on the messages that have made a difference for us, and on what we need to do in order to be better prepared for future worship experiences. And each week we re-commit ourselves to prepare well, enter fully into worship, reflect on the experience, and grow in our ability to worship.

1. Why do I come to Saint Peter for worship? What are my reasons for participating?
2. How can I increase my sense of expectancy at worship? How can I prepare myself so that God's word is more likely to touch my heart?
3. Where do I truly worship, outside of Sunday mornings in my home congregation?
4. How might my whole life become an expression of worship to God?
5. In order to strengthen my worship life, in the coming year I plan to:

ⁱ St. Luke 2:41-52, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

ⁱⁱ St. Luke 2:41-52, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart). To display the Greek text correctly, choose Palatino Linotype font.