

The Same, Only Different Part 1 Ephesians 4: 1-7

Worship is an important part of our Christian faith journey, yet if we are not careful it can become a routine rather than the highlight and focal point of our week. A few weeks ago, we learned that the church is not only a worshiping congregation, but a dwelling place for God. **2:22** What a privilege that is! Today, we are reminded that privilege also comes with great responsibility, both corporately and individually.

It is hard to believe, but some of us have worshiped together literally thousands of times in our lives. I have had the opportunity to step behind this pulpit on Sunday mornings at least 700 times since entering the ministry in 2007. In each one of those times, physically assembled or worshiping virtually, with pews filled or empty, God was there with us, just as He is when we are not together in worship. **But we are richly blessed with an increased awareness of the presence of His Holy Spirit when we gather to worship.**

There will also be times when an extra measure of grace is poured out upon us. One of those occasions happened several years ago in the sanctuary of the former RB church, where people from several faith communities had come together to worship and pray at a Good Friday Tenebrae service. That evening, the pews and the choir loft were filled, and the sweet sound of voices singing and praying in unison echoed far beyond the stone walls of the church to the open windows of heaven. A Tenebrae service is unique to Good Friday. **Tenebrae** is the Latin word for darkness, and as the service progresses, the story of Christ's betrayal, passion and crucifixion is told through the Scriptures. Hymns are sung, and a series of candles are gradually extinguished. The service ends in weeping and near darkness, a grim reminder of what the world would look like without Jesus. It was a difficult thing to leave the sanctuary that evening, for God had made His presence known to His people by a glimpse of His absence.

Something similar happened a few months ago on Easter Sunday. A small group of believers gathered at the mausoleum at Greenhaven cemetery in Canfield to celebrate the sun rising. A **mausoleum** is an above ground resting place for the remains of the dead, and it might seem like a strange place for a worship service.

Make no mistake, we were not gathered as pagans worshiping the sun rising in the sky but followers of Jesus Christ celebrating the resurrection of the Son of God from the dead. As the Scriptures were read that morning, the sun appeared in the eastern sky and the gloom and doom of Good Friday was overcome by the brightness of the Risen Son of God, the only One with power to have us overcome the fear and sting of death. Pastor Timothy closed the service by singing a song called Living Hope, a song we have grown to love here at Millcreek and as the final notes rose to heaven that place of tears and sadness was transformed into a place of glory and hope. God had made His presence known to us once again.

At first glance, those two incredible worship experiences seem to be so very different. One was in the dark hours of the evening and the other during the early morning hours of the day. One was in the confines of a 100+-year-old stone building in the heart of the city of Youngstown, and the other in a resting place for the dead in the suburbs. At one we gathered in a church to mourn the death of Jesus and grieve our sins. At the other we gathered at a cemetery to celebrate the fullness of our life in Christ. At one we sang ancient hymns with heavy hearts and at the other it was modern songs of praise and joy. **They were the same, only different.** Much like us.

Those two services were not the same Sunday morning worship services that so many of us have grown accustomed to. The question is what made them different? One obvious thing is that they were not part of our typical worship routine, since Good Friday and Easter only come once a year. Sometimes, we do things more out of routine or habit than desire. How many of us travel to worship on the same roads every Sunday, even though most of us could choose two or even three different routes that will take us there? And when we do arrive at the church how many of us park in the same parking spot and sit in the same pew? Even worse, have you ever attended a Christmas Eve service and absent mindedly said "good morning" to a fellow worshiper even though it was 8:00 at night? Routines are fine when it comes to our daily tasks, but not when it comes to being the church, **the dwelling place for God.** It is anything but routine.

There will be times when God finds it necessary and good to interrupt our routines. Sometimes it comes by way of a powerful reminder of His presence, and other times it will be a powerful reminder of His absence. Perhaps Covid is a test of how we are responding in faith to both. In either case, something special happens when we do something unexpected or out of the ordinary to show Jesus how much we love Him.

God is revealed to us in a variety of ways, too many to look at this morning. **When God reveals His presence, He also reveals His love.** Although every moment we sense God's presence is precious, it is during times of extraordinary worship God might shake things up a bit to remind us anew that we are called and chosen people, a vital part of His kingdom. And it is during times of extraordinary turmoil that God might shake things up a bit to remind us anew that we are called and chosen to be a vital part of His plan for redemption. What a privilege!

The apostle Paul reminds us that we are to live a life worthy of that calling. **4:1** What does that mean? Is it living a life filled with "thou shall" and "thou shall nots"? Perhaps, for God's commandments are worthy of our love and violating them will cause us and others much grief. But we see that Paul has some different dos and don'ts in mind. **4:2** Do walk with humility....don't think you are more called or more chosen than the sinner worshiping in the pew next to you. Do walk gently, don't do damage like a bull in a China shop, don't expect applause and a parade. Be careful when you do walk in God's Garden, don't trample a tender flower that is just starting to sprout through the hard ground. Do walk patiently, and don't doubt God's love. **Peter 5:6** That means don't think for a moment that you are less called, less chosen, less blessed, less gifted, or less loved by God, because you are not.

Don't walk alone. Do bear one another in love. The word bear implies a burden, and at times it will be. There are some people we will just have to choose to put up with. Why? Perhaps they are having a hard time walking worthy and God has chosen you or I to help guide them along. Perhaps they are struggling with their own burdens and need help carrying them. **Galatians 6:2** If those reasons are not enough, think about this one. We will choose to put up with them because God has chosen to put up with us. What's fair is fair. The good news is that believers in Jesus Christ are called and chosen people and we need not bear our burdens alone.

Paul sums all of this up in the next few verses with a word we hear much about in the church today-unity. **4:3** Be **eager** to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. Unity is not a habit or routine but the desire of called and chosen people of God. **It is our desire because it is God's desire. John 17:21** Next week, Lord willing, we will explore what God's word reveals about unity in the body of Christ and what it does and does not mean for us. Until then, be encouraged and spend some time in this important letter that God has preserved for our benefit. Make it a desire, a habit and a routine and then be amazed how God makes His presence known! Amen