

The Church's First Job
Luke 24:50-53, Acts 2:37-47

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With the last two verses of his gospel, Luke gives us a clue as to how he sees the Christian life. The risen-from-the-dead Messiah has just blessed his disciples and been carried up to heaven. Listen to what Luke says then as a conclusion to the whole Jesus story: “And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.” The appropriate response to the Jesus story is to worship him and to bless God—in this case, in the Jewish temple.

When you get to the book of Acts, written as a sequel to Luke, you see the same thing once the Holy Spirit has been given to the believers. (Acts 2:46-47) “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.” They worshiped in the temple and praised God as they shared meals in homes. Chapter 2 starts with Peter and John going to the temple at the hour of prayer. Chapter 5 says that all the apostles were together in Solomon’s Porch, a colonnade on the side of the temple (5:12). When they are imprisoned, an angel lets them out and says “Go, stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this life” (5:20). The summary verse at the end of the chapter says “Every day in the temple and in homes they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as Messiah.”

What I want you to see is that it was the natural instinct of the Jesus-followers to worship in the temple as well as in homes. The Jewish religion was centered on worship of the holy God—with songs and prayers and sacrifices—and the followers of Jesus saw themselves as part of that tradition. They did not say to one another “Who needs the temple anymore?” They kept worshiping in the temple until they were kicked out. Jesus’ followers had all the more reason to praise God because of what God had done in Jesus’ life and resurrection, and where better to do it than the temple. You see clearly that it was important to them to gather together for worship, and this continues to be the pattern as new communities of believers are gathered around the Mediterranean: they do not have a temple, but they gather in homes for worship and praise and shared meals.

On this Roll Call Sunday when we celebrate the founding of our church, I want us to remember why we exist. At the risk of stating the obvious, let me say that the *first* reason we exist as a church is to worship. The Psalms are chock full of commands to praise the Lord, to give thanks, to declare God’s glory—and, as we’ve been learning on Thursday nights, the Psalms were the prayer book and hymnal of the early church. At first the early Christians worshiped in the temple, but then they came to understand the church itself as a temple. Each person’s body was a temple in the sense that it contained God’s Spirit, but they understood that we as a group are also a temple. Ephesians 2 (21-22) describes the church like this: “being joined together [we] grow into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.” If we as a congregation are being built into a temple, it means that we as a congregation are a dwelling place for God and a place where God is to be worshiped. 1 Peter (2:5) sounds the same note: “You yourselves are like living stones, being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

Maybe it's perfectly obvious to you that the church is a worshiping community and that this building is defined as a house of worship, but it seems to me that it is all too common today to see church members act as if worship is not really important to them.

What are the most important things for the church to be doing? Jesus gave us four big commands:

1. Love God—that's worship
2. Love your neighbor—that's ministry to your community
3. Love one another—that's fellowship, *being* a community
4. Make disciples—that's evangelism and education.

Evangelism is often listed as the first task of the church, but worship comes before witness in the life of the church. Besides that, worship may be the most powerful means of evangelism, and the purpose of evangelism after all is to produce more worshipers of Jesus.

It comes down to the question "What is the main purpose of human life?" You may remember that this is the first question in the Westminster Shorter Catechism which was used to teach the faith to Reformed people in England and Scotland: "What is the chief end of man?" And the answer: "To glorify God and enjoy him forever." We exist in order to bring praise and glory to God, which we do by being fully human as God intended and by enjoying God himself, delighting in God—which is the very heart of worship. Ephesians 1:12 says that God made himself known to us and adopted us as his children "so that we who...set our hope on Christ might live for the praise of his glory." That's what we live for. If you open the book of Revelation, you see that John's vision of heaven is all about worship. Worship is what is happening in heaven right now, and worship is our destiny.

There is no question in Jesus' mind that the greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. There is no sense that we should substitute love of neighbor for the worship of God. The Great Commission is not given by Jesus as the *only* command to the church; it just means that the other commands should be spread to all nations and all generations.

So why does the #1 job of the church sometimes get diminished nowadays—especially in evangelical and mainline Protestant churches? I can point to at least five trends in our culture:

1. Secularization, which has been going on for almost three centuries now. That's the sense that the world you see is the only real world, and more important at least than what you cannot see. It involves the demystification of life and the loss of the sense of the holy. Romantics, neo-pagans, and "the spiritual but not religious" all push back against this, but it's still dominant. And I think many church members have a view of life that is basically secular.
2. Radical individualism. This view says that my life is about my life and my freedom and not about the demands of community or deity. This view says "If I'm gonna worship, I can do it by myself. I can worship at the beach. I don't need the church."
3. A lack of humility toward tradition and community. This is an extension of individualism, I suppose, but it's common to think that nothing that was thought or written before you were born could be of much value. And it's common to think that the community has no right to tell the individual what to do. Worship requires a certain humility, a willing to use tradition, to let the dead lead us in approaching God because we don't know how to do it ourselves. Worship also involves being humble toward a community in order to learn how to approach God as part of a people and not as a loner; it means letting the community teach us.

4. Religion as moralizing. So many people on the right and on the left have reduced religion to moral teaching. Even the Christian gospel gets turned into a fight for what is morally right rather than an experience of the grace of God in a personal relationship or communal worship. The assumption is that church is about producing good people who live moral lives. That has nothing to do with worship. Some of you will remember that Lilly-funded study a few years ago of the faith of teenagers which decided that the real faith of *adults* in this country is not Christianity at all, but what they called Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Which brings us to
5. Religion as therapy. A great many people come to church in order to get something that makes them feel good, and others come to get church to fix their problems. Pastors are at fault in that we have succumbed to consumer-oriented worship and preaching, and because we have advertised ourselves as Doctor Fix-you-up. But that's not what church is for. Church is for encountering Christ and becoming part of a community shaped by him.

Maybe you see yourself affected by some of those cultural forces. Even so, that is no excuse for making worship less than important in your life. There is simply no substitute for gathering together for worship; that is at the heart of what it means to be the church. Hebrews 10:25 says "Do not give up meeting together for worship, as some have been doing, but encourage one another [by worshipping together]."

Some people say they don't come to worship because Sunday is their only day off. What that means is that you view worship as work (a duty, not a delight)—and that you don't understand that you *need* the worship of God to be fully human. It shouldn't be a grind to come to worship, any more than it is a grind to take a breath. It's something you do to stay alive, and if it's not pleasurable, it's not worship. What do you think about all the people who come to Harbor Church on their vacations? Do they think of it as work? Maybe they know something you don't, or have forgotten.

Some people say they don't come to worship because they have to work on Sunday. I understand the hospitality industry can't just tell guests to stay in bed until after church. But if that's a problem, here's how we address it: we offer worship on Sunday night, or early Sunday morning, or on Saturday night. It's that important.

Sometimes you can't come to worship because you are ill. I get that, and I don't want you here when you are sick. But when people are homebound or hospitalized, we ought to take worship to them—a song, a prayer, the bread and the cup.

My pet peeve in church life—I'll admit it, and it's always dangerous to preach about a pet peeve—is people who want to function as church members but stay away from the worship of God. If you attend committee or board meetings but not worship, you are making a statement about what you think is important. You are saying that the nuts and bolts of running an organization matter to you, but praising God and listening to him is really pointless. If we prioritize decision-making over worship, it probably means that we like to be in charge—and in worship we are definitely not in charge. It may mean that we are practical atheists, that we live as though God does not exist, or at least as though God does not really do anything. If anything is going to get done by this church, we think, I'm gonna have to do it myself.

But the reason this church does not thrive and grow as it could is not that we don't have enough workers; it's really that we don't have enough worship. We are trying to work for God rather than letting God fill us with his Spirit and do his work through us.

It is possible for a church to become a shell of a church, like Herod's Temple in Jerusalem, which had outer courts and inner courts, beautiful and well-maintained, but unlike the Tabernacle in the desert or Solomon's Temple, God's presence had never descended on the holy of holies in Herod's Temple. At the heart of the temple was an empty space where the holy should have been.

Once a tourist was standing in front of a historic New England church admiring the building. He asked a person nearby—who turned out to be the pastor—"Can you tell me, is this a museum or a church?" I hope for God's sake it's a church, a place inhabited by God and those who would worship him in spirit and in truth. Amen.