

## “Presence: the Path of Worship”

Date: March 8, 2015

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: Acts 2:43-47; Hebrews 10:19-25

Theme: worship

Occasion: Lent 3, series on discipleship

Hebrews 10:25 says: “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another.” This week we are looking at the vow of presence, as embodied in worship. No one walks the discipleship path alone. There is no such thing as solitary Christianity. Being a follower of Jesus means being in community; it means coming together with other followers of Jesus.

Each one of us has an instinctual desire to belong. The African word *ubuntu* captures that desire by saying that we are people through other people; we find our humanity in connection with others.

In the New Testament, that spirit of *ubuntu* is exhibited in the book of Acts, as Luke describes the way the first followers of Christ devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching, to fellowship with one another, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.

They met in the temple courts, fellowshiped in one another’s homes and praised God as more people came to know and experience the Gospel. It is a pattern of Christian worship and community for us to follow as well.

Jesus demonstrated life in community by calling 12 ordinary men to become his disciples. He promised that wherever two or three are gathered together, he would be among them. That’s why we come together every week – to be in the presence of Jesus.

Methodists love to retell the story of John Wesley's heart-warming experience on May 24, 1738. He records in his Journal that he went "very unwillingly" to a small-group Bible study that was meeting in London in a house on Aldersgate Street. He went unwillingly, but he went. He was present.

That night, the spirit of God touched his heart. He wrote, "I felt my heart strangely warmed." This heart-warming experience was a critical and pivotal point on Wesley's personal journey of discipleship. Afterwards, Wesley was a changed man, and he helped to ignite the spiritual awakening that swept across England and became the Methodist movement around the world.

But what would have happened, or more to the point – what would NOT have happened – if Wesley had not gone to the Bible study that night? He went unwillingly, but he did go. Now, I cannot promise that our hearts will be "strangely warmed" every time we are present with a small group or present in worship.

But I can promise this: It won't happen if we're not there! Our presence in worship matters, because it could result in the transformation of our lives. Amen?

As United Methodists, we pledge our allegiance to Jesus Christ through the United Methodist Church, and we promise to support it by our presence. From the earliest days of the Methodist movement at Oxford, John and Charles Wesley insisted that the Methodist people be faithful in worship in the Church of England.

Benjamin Ingham, an early Methodist, confirms in his diary his daily presence at morning and evening prayer at Oxford. He was present for the services on every saint's day in the Anglican tradition, and he was persistent in following Wesley's guide to receive the sacrament as often as possible.

The other Oxford students considered the practice of daily worship to be obsessive, and it brought scorn and mockery on these first Methodists. The term *Methodists* was originally meant to be an insult.

Years later, as the movement spread across England, Wesley continued to encourage the Methodists to receive the sacrament in the Anglican Church until they were forced out by many congregations. When Wesley wrote his General Rules for the Methodist societies, his third rule was "to attend upon the ordinances of God," referring to the sacraments.

From the very beginning, being present in corporate worship has held a central place in the Wesleyan understanding of discipleship.

But why do people attend worship? Is it only a sense of duty, or merely out of habit? Worship, I would suggest, is meant to give God glory and honor. It is one of those holy habits that we do, whether we feel like it or not, because God is deserving of our thanks and praise.

Many people choose to be present in worship because they like seeing their friends. While not a bad reason, it is not the most noble. Others come to worship to grow in their faith, to be inspired and to connect with God. While it doesn't happen every week for everyone, worship is where we come into the presence of God.

But have you ever been with someone, and realized that you haven't been "present" to a word the person has said? I think we all have. Sometimes it's hard to be truly present. But the point I want to make is this, there is a very real difference between attendance and presence.

Some people come to the worship service just to say they've done it. "It's expected, I did it, isn't that enough?" But there is so much more to be experienced in worship if we prepare ourselves before coming. It's very possible to be in the worship service physically, but for your mind to be a million miles away.

Being present for worship is being aware and attentive to the things that are taking place around you. It involves really listening. It means putting yourself into the experience: singing the songs, praying the prayers, listening to what's being said.

Worship is not entertainment. We don't come to worship to be entertained. It's a different kind of an experience than a movie, or a concert or a theater production. Often times, you get out of it what you put into it. So, how do you prepare yourself for worship, so that you can be truly present?

What you do, during the week, can prepare you for worship. If you've been seeking God in your private devotions, come to worship seeking God in the experience of the gathered body of Christ. Talking to God, reading the Bible, praying for the preacher and the choir all help to prepare one for worship. Getting a good night's rest can help. If you're tired and falling asleep, you can't be present in worship.

Prayer at the beginning of worship can prepare our hearts for what is to come. I love the fellowship that we have out in the hallway before we begin. But when we come inside the sanctuary, we need to give our hearts and minds the chance to refocus.

Coming with an expectant heart changes the way you worship. If you come expecting to meet God, there is a good chance that you will. If you come to worship out of sense of routine, we tend to overlook God. It's interesting to me the various reactions that people often have to worship experiences.

Some people come and they leave totally blessed. They encountered God; they felt the Spirit moving; the message touched their heart and soul. And that same worship service, some people leave saying it was boring. I agree that we always need to be seeking new ways to be relevant, but too often people get nothing out of worship because they came expecting too little.

So, what can *you* do to make that shift in your mind and heart, so that you can be present to God?

Presence in worship, certainly our attendance, but also our active participation, is an important path in the life of discipleship. May God enrich our experiences of worship, to His glory and honor. Amen? Amen!