

First Presbyterian Church
Gal. 1:3-4, “Prepared in Worship: Gathering and Peace”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 7/9/2016

Welcome everyone, this is our first Sunday in a new sermon series entitled,
“Prepared in Worship.”

This series corresponds with the first section of our grant project,
“Worship into Life,” which you’ve already heard about.

The point of this whole project is essentially two-fold:

- 1) To figure out what it is we do here every Sunday morning.
- 2) To figure out how what we do here every Sunday morning matters for all the other days.

Things will get a bit more nuanced and detailed along the way,
but if you ever wonder what it is we’re doing and why you can come
back to these two basic purposes:

- 1) To figure out what it is we do here every Sunday morning.
- 2) To figure out how what we do here every Sunday morning matters for all the other days.

And what is it we do here every Sunday morning?
We are prepared in worship.

We enter into worship anytime the people of God,
united in Christ and filled with the Holy Spirit,
receive and respond to God’s self-revelation.

Put differently, in worship we are invited to engage in a conversation with God
that ties everything together in life.

When we get inside worship and look around,
we find that it is not primarily about us, our leadership abilities,
or our artistic sensibilities.

Those things are present, and they can contribute to great beauty
and encouragement during times of worship.

But our worship cannot simply consist of human creativity and skill.

The bedrock of our worship must be this: That week in and week out,
God's own Spirit calls us to belief and repentance,
introduces us to the person and character of Jesus Christ,
assures us of who God is and who we are,
enables us to overcome the powers
that so often fracture our lives,
offers a radical welcome directly from God to all people,
invites us to join in God's mission in the world,
and tells us of the hope we have when we submit our whole selves
to the One revealed in the pages of the Bible
as our Creator, Provider, Redeemer, Comforter,
Advocate, the Lord Almighty,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I say we are "Prepared in Worship" because this collective conversation with God
results in some kind of change or transformation in us.

We are prepared to share in the life of God's Kingdom.
Having entered into this divine correspondence, we are changed,
and we find a new way of looking at the world around us.

This preparation doesn't just happen by coming together and doing things
that we think are fun or enjoyable or even beautiful.

It would be sad if our worship never included any of those things,
but they aren't the reason why we worship the way we do.

In fact, each element of our worship service
reflects a specific portion of our relationship with God
through Jesus Christ as found in Scripture.

While it's certainly true that faithful worship can happen in a wide variety of ways,
with different music, different orders, using many artforms,
it is also true that we cannot simply, "do whatever we want."

The reason is that if we just do whatever we want,
we will end up shaping ourselves in our own image,
rather than being brought into the likeness of Christ.

This series is going to take the various elements of our gathered worship one or two at a time, and look at how it is that they prepare us or shape us as God's people.

Today we're going to consider two elements of worship that are generally over-looked: Gathering and the Peace.

First, the Gathering.

When does our gathered worship start?

At the Call to Worship?

At the first Hymn?

At the Passing of the Peace?

At the Welcome?

At the Prelude?

I suggest to you that gathered worship starts before all of those things. We begin to respond to God in our very gathering together.

Again and again in Scripture we read of people gathering for worship: From Israel in the tabernacle, to the creation of the temple, to the formation of synagogues, to the house churches in the New Testament church, to the visions of worship in heaven, we are continuously provided encouragements to gather together.

In Matthew's gospel Jesus said, **"For where two or three gather in my name... I am with them."**

Yes we can worship God on our own as individuals or families, but something different happens when we gather more broadly. Solo-worship is not enough for us to be prepared for the spiritual, emotional, and social challenges that surround us in the world.

In your home you wake a certain time, you plan what you will wear, you ready yourself or your family members for church. This could be chaotically piling into a car at the last minute,

anxiety building up.
Or it could be arriving early with plans to help with music,
coffee hour, or Christian education.
Whatever you do, there is some level
of engagement and orientation
before you even walk through the doors.

In gathering together, we are responding to God's self-revelation
by assembling the body of Christ,
physically moving ourselves to share a common space and time.
This very act of getting here and being here
is a powerful and quite countercultural marker.

When else are 130 people gathered in such a way on a Sunday morning
purely by their own choice and volition?

There is power just in showing up – and the power is not only in you,
but it's in the person sitting next to you.
When you (as an individual) gather with us,
it means that each one of us is bolstered
and made more by your presence.

As our culture works more and more to separate our lives into individualized,
fractured, and bite-sized experiences, gathered worship in particular
has a strong shaping and preparing force behind it.

However haphazard your arrival may be, take note of this truth:
In coming, in showing up, in being present together for a purpose,
you are already entering into worship.

“For where two or three gather in my name...there I am with them.”

Next, the Passing of the Peace.

In this gathered worship we invite a unique and potentially threatening dynamic:
The gathering of people who (as sinful human beings)
have a history of hurting each other.

Over time, we all get things wrong from time to time, we get selfish, forgetful, bossy, rude, mean...do I need to go on?

So how can we, who have these repeated patterns of dysfunctional behavior, come together and sing and pray and celebrate and mourn together?

Only through the peace of Christ.

As those forgiven and brought together by Christ for the purpose of worship, we use a purposefully shaped greeting, "Peace of Christ to you."

Here we come to the passage we read from Galatians.

Paul's opening greeting poetically transforms two typical greetings into his own gospel shaped greeting.

He begins with, "Grace" which is a slight adaptation of the universal greeting in the Greek speaking world.

You see Greeks open a letter with "Greetings!" which is the word, "Chairein!"

But Paul uses a similar sounding word that has more theological heft:

"Grace" which is similar sounding word, "Charis!"

So from Chairein to Charis, the Greek members of the church heard a greeting that appealed to their sensibilities.

This greeting was one that everyone could recognize.

But then Paul also adds, "Peace," which is of course the universal greeting for the Jewish world, what we know as "Shalom."

This, of course, appeals to the sensibilities of the church members with Jewish ancestry and honors their place in the congregation.

But just as "Grace" goes deeper than the typical greeting in Greek, so "Peace" has an additional layer in Paul's use.

The peace that Paul is referring to is the Peace of Christ, which is the fullness of everything hoped for in Shalom.

It's the peace made possible by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ,
the peace that ends once and for all the enmity between humanity and God,
the peace that makes possible real forgiveness in heaven and on earth.

This may be the most important message that we as Christians
can take deep within us wherever we go:

Grace to you – God's unmerited favor!
and Peace to you – wholeness, justice, and shared life
in the community of Christ.

Our little downtown community could use a little peace, don't you think?

We've had some issues with belongings being piled up, camps forming,
the police being called in at night to break up disturbances.

The News Register has done some articles:

One saying that churches have essentially invited this situation
when the stuff was all piled up on public property beside the church,
and the next saying that churches have
pulled out the welcome mat due to a long-planned
closure of our grounds for 4th of July and VBS.

So from the headlines a casual observer might think the churches
are the bad guys for inviting the problem,
but they're also the bad guys for kicking people out.

But that's okay – because the hard work of being people of peace in the midst
of very complicated, multilayered issues doesn't reduce to headlines
very easily.

We're not in the "good headlines" business,
we're not in the "make everyone happy" business,
we're actually not in business at all.

We're people who are gathered in Jesus name and reconciled by his peace,
offering his peace and reconciliation to the world around us.

Do you think that our downtown businesses, our neighbors who have houses,
our neighbors who don't have houses,
and the churches who are right in the middle of it all
could be benefited from the peace of Christ?

Of course! And how will they receive it?

Through the people shaped by Christ's peace.

And every week we remind each other this is who we are
in our worship by greeting each other with the words,
"Peace of Christ to you," "and also to you."

Gathering and peace.

These are worship practices that shape us to be a particular
kind of community.