

Spiritual Disciple Series: Worship  
Hebrews 10:23-24  
WRCoB 9.27.20

Our subject matter today  
Is the spiritual discipline of worship.

Worship is the central function of church.

It's what churches do . . .

The one time per week  
When the whole church gathers

To collectively give praise to God

Through singing and praying  
Preaching and teaching God's word  
And practicing the ordinances of the faith.

But we can't talk about worship

Without taking into consideration the context  
We are in currently  
Namely, the corona virus pandemic.

Church is different now.

West Richmond ceased in-person worship

Since the middle of March more than six months ago.

Our worship services has been online ever since.

Well, you might ask, is that so bad?

Actually, it's been kind of nice, hasn't it  
Sitting at home on the couch in 'jammies'  
Watching West Richmond's online worship?

I can get used to this!

And then to support our inclinations  
We throw around clichés such as  
"The church isn't closed,"  
"The church isn't a building; it's people."

These statements, indeed, are true.

But let me ask, is it possible that we can be the church  
Without physically coming together  
As the community of faith?

Where I am heading this morning is, no, you can't.  
At least not over the long haul.

The church can and will suffer long-term effects.

And so as West Richmond prepares  
To return to in person worship next Sunday  
It's a good idea to remind ourselves  
Of the importance of corporate worship.

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Today's Scripture Lesson explains that in assembling  
We spur one another on in love and good deeds  
Encouraging each other.

In other words, the church has inward and outward focuses  
A gathered and scattered function.

We come together to worship God  
To encourage one another  
To prompt each other to acts of love and good deeds.

And then, we go out to do the ministry of the church  
By serving the needs of our neighbor near and far.

It's what Jesus did.

Jesus spent time discipling the twelve  
So that they, in turn, could go out  
And minister to the people.

And so when the church cannot meet together  
An important component of the church is gone.

And when we say the church is not closed  
Or the church is not a building but people  
We acquiesce to the notion  
It's ok not to meet physically.

I am not suggesting we reopen at all costs.

There are times the church must stop gathering  
For a time, due to persecution or disease.

But before we get too comfortable with online worship  
I think we should reflect on God's call  
To make a habit of meeting together.

The physical gathering of the community of faith is vital.

I can remember before the pandemic  
In previous years as pastor

I met with church folk  
Who had sporadic church attendance.

I would ask why.

Often, I would hear  
That they do church in their living room

They would watch so and so on TV  
And considered that just as good  
As going to church.

Beside they would add  
Charles Stanley preaching in their living room  
Was a bit better than me preaching in church.

Well, I couldn't argue with that.

But what I would argue is that  
They were missing something critically important.

And that's what I intend to talk about today.

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Church by its very definition means assembly.

The Greek word *Ekklesia* means church.

But before it meant church

The term meant an assembly of citizens

In the democratic city/states of ancient Greece.

So by its very definition

The church is the gathering of people

Apart from others.

Can online worship satisfy the command to assemble?

Well, yes, but probably in the same way

A zoom calls satisfies the need to be with family.

Would you rather be with your loved ones

Through a zoom call or in real life?

I know in certain situations, it is the best we can do.

But it is certainly not ideal, is it?

And maybe that's why a recent Barna poll

Recognizes that online attendance has dropped

Since initial viewing began

Since church went online.

Not that online worship is wrong.

It has been a great asset to the church

And will continue to be

Even after we return to in person worship.

Thanks to Kevin's production work  
Our musicians, worship leaders and story tellers.

It has been a great alternative to in person gathering.  
Considering the circumstances.

Not only, we've reached more people online  
Than go through our doors.

Still, it cannot be an equivalent to in person assembly.

Church, by definition, is not a building.  
It is the gathered community of believers.

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Secondly, as a congregation  
We are a covenant community.

As a covenant community  
We are accountable to one another  
We are responsible for each other.  
We are to look after one another.

But the way we do our online service  
Viewers are anonymous.

We may have 35 viewers on a Sunday worship service  
But we don't know who anyone is  
Unless someone specifically comments.

A sense of belonging, a sense of recognition  
And a sense of place  
Are vibrant aspects of a community of faith.

Thirdly, discipleship is a part of the assembly of believers.

Growing in faith is a personal and a corporate thing.

There are personal ways to grow  
As in the inner spiritual disciplines

And there are external ways to grow  
As in the outer disciplines

There are also corporate ways to grow in faith  
As in what we're talking about today.

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Fourthly, God meets us when we gather.

As Jesus once said,  
When two or three are gathered, there I am.

There is a spiritual energy  
In the form of the Holy Spirit  
When believers come together.

I believe when we worship together collectively  
When we sing and pray  
Read scripture, listen to the preached word  
And practice the ordinances

God reveals himself in ways  
That is not experienced in any other way.

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In other words, gathering for worship matters.

We just can't get the same thing watching church  
Than we can being church.

As I said, there are times  
When the church has had to find alternatives  
To the weekly gathering of the faithful.

We are in just such a situation today.

But this is not the first time the church  
Has had to wrestle with decisions  
To come together for worship.

It is not the first time the church  
Has had to consider the risks of gathering.

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How about our own denomination's humble beginnings?

The Brethren started with a small group of people  
Meeting privately in homes to study the Bible.

What they were doing was an illegal act  
With severe consequences.

But they met anyway  
And the Church of the Brethren  
Grew from that small, but dynamic group of people.

How about the secret worship services  
Held at night, deep in the woods  
By groups of enslaved black Christians?

They met knowing, if discovered  
    There would be hell to pay  
        From their white slave owners.

The met anyway.

How about the churches in China?

If Chinese authorities discover churches  
    Not officially recognized by the state  
        They'd arrest the leaders  
            And burn the church to the ground.

Does that stop them from gathering?

How about the EYN church in Garkida, Nigeria  
    A Church of the Brethren congregation.

In February of this year, Boko Haram attacked the village.

They burned many of the homes, shops, and businesses.

They burned the church.

During the attack  
    The district's women fellowship groups  
        Had been meeting in the church.

They fled into the hills behind the church  
    And stayed in the bush until morning.

Fortunately, no one was injured.

They returned to see this.

1, 2, and/or 3

That was a Friday.

Saturday, the church people turned out.

They took out the burned pulpit and burned pews

Swept up what they could

And do you know what?

The very next day, Sunday, they met for worship

They were determined to be a witness

Against the destructive forces of evil

That sought to destroy them.

They took the calculated risk

That it was more important to gather together

Than it was to be safe and stay home.

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I am not calling for the church to open indiscriminately

There is a risk in reopening.

However, I believe it is extremely important

To reopen church as soon as it is relatively safe to do so

Our spirits need to give praise to God

Through song and prayer

Through the written and the preached word

Through the ordinances

And through the fellowship and the potlucks  
Through the parking lot chats  
And the afternoon volleyball games.

Let's joyfully anticipate our coming together again  
That we can spur each other toward love and good deeds.

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A week from today, we meet in person.

We will continue to live stream our worship  
So you can watch it from home  
If you're not comfortable meeting.

We will do everything possible  
To make it a safe environment.

We have made all the provisions possible  
For your safety and wellbeing.

There will be instructions posted on our website  
FB page and electronic bulletin.

Pray whether it is the right decision for you  
To return to face-to-face worship  
Or remain watching our online service.

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And so, let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess  
For he who promised is faithful.

Glorious and majestic are God's deeds  
And his righteousness endures forever.