

Thirteenth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/B): **“Why Do You Worship?”**
Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58
August 17-18, 2024
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

The highlight of my summer has been a wedding, my daughter Kristiane’s wedding! So many reasons to be joyful, then and now. Some folks have said, “With all the build-up, quite a letdown after, right?” But I’ve had to say, “Not really.” I have such great memories of that whole week, and **family** is at the heart of them. I had nieces and nephews come in from Kuwait, Alaska, Nevada, North Carolina, Georgia. I had cousins come from Massachusetts. We see each other way too seldom, and when I saw them I welled up with tears: joy that we were finally together for a happy occasion and not a funeral, as has been the case all too often.

But the joy wasn’t **just** because of being with my **immediate** family. It was also gladness for the fusion of our family and that of my son-in-law Mike – and then all that joy was multiplied by the presence of so many members of our Holy Trinity family! It was like a movie in which different groups of people show up in different scenes and then they’re finally in the same place at the same time! I couldn’t have been happier for what was both a reunion and a meet-and-greet of some of my favorite people in the whole world!

The printed intro to today’s Scripture from Ephesians says, “Because we are filled with the Spirit, Christians regularly rejoice together, give thanks to God for one another, and care for one another.” **“Regularly”** rejoicing together means more than twice a year at Christmas and Easter ☺. Here **you** are in the dog days of August. I say a heartfelt “Thank you!” That’s just an **echo** of our Lord’s heartfelt “Thank you!” for obeying the oft-ignored commandment, “Honor the Sabbath and keep it holy.”

But why? **Why** are you here worshiping instead of somewhere else?

- Keeping the commandment is one obvious reason to be here....
- The Gospel gives us another huge one. Our Lord Jesus tells us, *“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever, and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”* (John 6:51) Holy Communion is spiritual medicine for the sin that ails us and threatens to kill our souls, to fracture our relationship with our loving Lord. In the *Small Catechism* Martin Luther says that in both Holy Baptism **and** Holy Communion we receive “life, forgiveness and salvation.” The word *salvation* has the same root as the word *salve*, something that *heals*. Receiving Holy Communion can help to heal invisible but very real hurts. Luther called it, “healing for the sick, life for the dying, food for the hungry.”
- Our Lord Jesus said, *“Whenever two or more of you are gathered in My name, there I am in your midst.”* (Matthew 18:20) Many people will say, “I can pray anywhere, it doesn’t need to be in the sanctuary!” True, and personal prayer is very important. But it’s not a **substitute** for corporate prayer, worshiping with the community of faith. Jesus Christ has promised to be present in a special way when the Body of Christ gathers and calls upon Him.

Probably the vast majority of us would agree that “the world,” the culture in which we live, is often out of sync with Gospel values. If our children depended only on current events and newsfeeds about famous people to decide what “the rules” are for leading a successful life, they’d come up with a much different list than the 10 commandments, the 2 greatest commandments (loving God above all else and our neighbors as ourselves), and the new commandment Jesus gave the night before He died (that we should love another as He has loved us). The behavior of many people in the news and of a fair share of those the world calls heroes is quite different than the way of relating Jesus describes in the Sermon on the Mount. Because Christianity is essentially countercultural, we need a community of faith to keep us honest, to remind us of the way **Jesus** teaches us to live, and to embody what it means to live a life of faith active in love. I love reading biographies about friends of

Jesus through the centuries, learning stories about the courageous, creative, ways in which people, sometimes not that different than me, have lived out their vocation, their holy calling in this world. **I** need all of **you** to show me what it looks like to follow Christ today, here, in everyday circumstances and familiar places. In my experience, some of “the great ones of faith” have knelt in the same pews and at the same Communion rail that we do. Their stories doesn’t appear in print anywhere, and their names will barely be remembered in 75 years. But their limited circle of influence has had a profound effect on how those of us who knew and loved them. They’ve proved it is possible to live in love, to honor God and serve our neighbor, to “practice” Christianity, day in and day out, imperfectly but passionately, for as long as we live.

When Jesus of Nazareth walked this earth, He drew **huge** crowds of people longing to be healed. The friends of the paralytic couldn’t even get in the door of the home where Jesus was preaching. People were spilling out the door and hanging on window ledges to hear. Not to be deterred, the devoted and determined friends dug a hole in the roof, rigged the crippled fellow’s litter with ropes, and then gently (or not so gently?) lowered him through the ceiling and deposited him at Jesus’ feet! And if 5,000 men were present at the multiplication of loaves and fishes we heard about a few weeks ago, that means the crowd was closer to 20,000 people, once women and children were counted! So why aren’t people spilling out the door or hanging on the window ledges during our worship this weekend? After all, there’s plenty of hurt in our world and in people’s hearts, minds and bodies today. There’s lots of room for healing. I think if Jesus were physically present in **human** form today, He’d rival Taylor Swift in her ability to draw a crowd. But He’s present in different form: in, with and under bread and wine. He’s not so easy to recognize, except

through the eyes of faith. You **have** faith and you recognize Him in this holy Supper. Trust that you will indeed go forth forgiven and strengthened, gladdened and inspired by your faithful presence in this assembly today.

Ultimately our presence in worship is about God not us. Earlier I mentioned the intro to the Ephesians Scripture: “Because we are filled with the Spirit, Christians regularly rejoice together, give thanks to God for one another, and care for one another.” It ends: “In this very way we revere our Lord Jesus Christ.”¹ What other reason do we need to gather in thanksgiving, worshiping as the family of faith, members of the Body of Christ? Amen

¹*Celebrate* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2023, for Aug. 17-18, 2024).

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham