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Why Do We Worship the Way that We Do? -- I. Beginnings and Endings

(Acts 17:22-28 NRSV) "Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, 'Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. 23 For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. 24 The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. 26 From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, 27 so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him--though indeed he is not far from each one of us. 28 For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.'"

Why do we worship the way that we do? Well, as with most things in life, the answer lies partly in habit. This is the way we've done it, so that's why we do it this way. And that isn't necessarily a bad answer; there is something to be said for conserving the old. At the same time, there's nothing sacred or unchangeable about the way we worship on Sunday mornings. There's no verse in the Bible you can point to that contains the order of worship that's in the bulletin in your hands. Moreover, churches throughout history have worshiped with a variety of forms. The Eastern Orthodox church has lavish, beautiful services on Sundays that often last for three hours – and their churches often have no pews, everybody stands! If you've ever been to a Quaker worship service you might we'll initially feel impatient – it feels as if nothing happens when for long, long stretches folks sit in silence and wait for the spirit to move them to speak. One of the groups that traces its lineage to the same founders that we Disciples do, the Church of Christ, uses no musical instruments whatsoever in worship except a pitch-pipe; all the hymns are sung a capella. The breadth of worship practices in our own wider denominational family is profound as well and worship at a

predominantly Haitian or Puerto Rican or Samoan or African-American Disciples church usually looks very different than our worship here. Over the years, folks have occasionally tried to find in the New Testament the one, single, “right” pattern for Sunday worship. All those attempts fail for two reasons: first, there never was only one pattern to worship in New Testament times, and two, God’s people have always incorporated local customs to the church’s worship in every place.

So, there is nothing absolute, sacred, or unchangeable about any particular pattern of worship that any congregation uses on Sunday mornings. That includes ours. In this short sermon series, then, I want to look at and think with you about why we worship the way that we do. I hope to explain the theological significance of the various parts of worship. I hope to cause both you and me to think more deeply about what makes for good and effective worship and what does not. Today’s topic is beginnings and endings. What are we trying to do by the way we begin worship? How about the way we close worship?

Let’s start this way: what’s the purpose of the Prelude and the Call to Worship? Why do we have such things? Why don’t we just get right to it and skip that “pre-“ stuff? Well, like it or not, when you think about it, a lot of life’s “pre” stuff is actually really crucial stuff. For example, if you skip over the **P**reamble to the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution you will miss those phrases about all being created equal and “We the people” that so define our country’s hopes and dreams and goals. You can find more than a few philandering movie stars who will tell you that it turned out that the “**pre**-nuptial” agreement ended up being rather important to their bank accounts. If you skip over the “**pre**face” to the Gospel of John you will miss some of the most beautiful language in the whole Bible: *“in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God... and in Him was no darkness at all.”* On a rather dangerous road where we used to live, there was a sign that would start flashing

“Prepare to Stop” whenever the traffic-light up ahead was about to change. I saw more than a couple of people over the years apparently ignore that preparation to the detriment of their cars and their health. If you don’t properly **prepare** the house when you are getting ready to paint it you may save time in the short run, but you’ll make yourself greater problems in the long run. I’ll bet you can think of your own examples where the “pre” stuff is actually really important.

So where am I going with all of this? Let me cut to the chase: the opening moments of our worship service, as embodied in the Prelude and Call to Worship are absolutely key because **their job is to re-define us and re-focus us**. *To re-define us and re-focus us*. What do I mean? Well, first, each one of us comes to worship on a Sunday morning defined by a host of things. We are defined, in part, by the fact that we are someone’s parent or child or spouse or grandparent or friend, and we come, carrying all those definitions in our hearts and souls – we come sometimes with joy about those definitions but sometimes in pain at their frustrations. We come defined by the work we do – we are somebody’s employee or someone’s employer, or if we are retired, pension checks that we get from when work defined us are a continuing reminder of that part of our lives. We come with our distinctive ethnic and family backgrounds. We come defined by our tenure – some have been a part of this place for 80 years and some are here for the first time – and those differences also help define us and help make us who we are and add to the richness of our life together – just as they also add to the challenges of our life together.

Now, none of these definitions of who we are wrong or bad. They are certainly unavoidable; we are shaped for better or worse by our family, our work, our jobs, our ethnicities and so on. **But when we come to worship, God has a different definition in mind; God is seeking to re-define us and thereby also re-focus us**. Let me tell you a story:

In the 1960's there was a police chief in a [California town] that had become a mecca for college students during spring break. The business folks loved the money the students brought in, but the students – mostly male – were behaving worse and worse, getting drunk and behaving badly. The Police Chief found that putting them in jail overnight for being drunk and disorderly wasn't helping – in fact, it made the problem worse when a night in jail became a kind of sign of one's macho-ness. His first attempt to solve the problem – by putting them in jail for 36 hours and giving them only bread and water – failed. Why? Well, because then the guys who didn't even drink started pretending to be drunk just so they could get arrested and then brag about on being fed bread and water. The chief ran out of jail space and his staff was working overtime.... So the Chief tried a second approach: He put the jailed students on baby food. Instead of treating them like criminals, ...he treated them like infants who weren't capable of eating more than strained peas. And almost overnight he turned those macho students into laughing stocks, those brave eaters of bread into silly eaters of jars of strained peas. The point? Well, the first time, the Chief had asked himself, "How do I more severely punish these students for breaking the law?" And he put them on bread and water. But when that didn't work, he asked himself, "How do I embarrass these students for breaking the law?"¹

Put another way, the police chief's second tactic was an exercise in **redefining the situation**, and **redefining those students**. His first attempt defined the students as criminals to be punished; his second attempt defined them as children who sometimes need to be confronted with their childishness.

Now, when we come to worship, God won't be seeking to embarrass us or feed us the equivalent of spiritual strained peas. But those "preparatory" moments at the beginning of worship – the Prelude and Call to Worship – are indeed God's offer to re-define **us** in the coming hour. They are an attempt to remind us of what the most **important** and **essential** definition of who we are is: **that we are children of God**,

¹Adapted from
www.winstonbrill.com/bril001/html/article_index/articles/301-350/article317_body.html

beloved of Jesus Christ. And so when we may come to church on a Sunday perplexed by our family problems, God is seeking to remind us that we are first of all a member of God's family. When we come to church somehow convinced that we must look out for number one because no one else will do so, those "preparatory" moments of worship are God's attempt to remind us that we are actually under God's care and that it is God who finally and ultimately looks out for us. When we come to church grieving over a dying parent or a friend who had a stroke or a son suffering an untimely and unfair disease or a co-worker going through hell, God is seeking to gently re-define us as ones who never grieve without hope and as ones who are eternally safe with Him. And in all of this, we are also thereby re-focused – turning our attention, our hearts, our energy toward God who wants to feed us and re-make us, but first of all we have to be paying attention!

Given all of that, let me say a bit more about each of those opening moments and say a word about how they indeed are God's attempt to re-define and re-focus us in the hour of worship that follows. The Prelude functions as a way to get our attention, to change the pace, to invite us to cease our conversations with one another and prepare to listen for God. It is not just an aesthetic intermission between one moment and the next, but is meant to indeed prepare us to know ourselves once again as God's people. And what of the Call to Worship? It too is part of God's offer to re-define us once again as first of all God's children, as first and last ones who live by not our own wits or our own devices but by the tender mercies and grace of God. The Call to Worship is the reminder of who we are, and Whose we are. For without that re-focusing, without that re-definition, without the focus on God, worship can too often simply be a respite rather than renewal, anesthesia rather than inspiration.

That was exactly the insight that the Apostle Paul had there in Athens so long ago. This is one of my favorite passages of scripture. In it, Paul goes to preach to the

Athenians. And those Athenians are indeed very spiritual – there are statues of unknown Gods all over the city. But they are, nonetheless, groping because they do not know who they are and Whose they are and therefore their lives are less beautiful, less transformed, less graced than they could be. And Paul, as it were, offers them a call to worship; he tells them of God’s offer to re-define them: Did you hear it as _____ read it? Paul tells them that they are “*search[ing] for God and... grope[ing] for him*” and invites them to realize that in fact it is “*In [**God** through Jesus Christ that they] live and move and have [their] being.*”

That is God’s offer to us too. In every moment of our lives. But we are met most clearly with that offer Sunday by Sunday by Sunday when we gather together to worship. We too are groping and searching, and in those opening moments of worship God is gently taking us by the hand or grabbing us by the scruff of the neck – whichever we need – and offering once again to re-define us, to remind us of our **essential** definition: children of God, family together, governed by grace, lavished with love. That is the opportunity that God takes every Sunday in those opening moments of our worship.

Now, what about endings? What does our having announcements and our recently re-instituted greeting of one another say theologically? Well, in their own way, those closing moments are also a reminder to us of how God wants to re-define and re-focus us as we are sent forth into our new week. For you see, our complex and sometimes crazy lives are too often lived as if we were alone, sort of like atoms banging off of other atoms but never really meeting. Those closing announcements remind us and re-define us that, no, we are children of God and children always exist as part of a family. The phrase “church family” is not simply a euphemism, it is in fact real: one cannot know oneself in the deepest sense as a child of God without being in

relationship to a motley crew of folks who claim the same place, the same people, the same heritage and history that you do. Nor is “family” ever, ever to be used as a kind of code-word for excluding folks, for families come in all kinds of sorts and shapes. But those closing announcements are meant to remind us and re-define us in that our first family is always the family of God, our first identity is always as a part of a Christian community where we are called to care for one another and the whole world. A minister friend of mine once preached a sermon entitled “The Gospel of the Announcements” and he was right: even in the announcements we are being offered the Gospel, the gospel that would seek to re-define us from our isolation into the family of God. Calendar and committee meetings and all those things – our announcement of these things is not simply advertising; no, it is the reminder that our lives as Christians are most truly lived out in a community on fire to live out God’s love in this world.

And, so, having gotten our attention, having prepared us to be again re-defined, re-born, and then having sent us forth at the end reminded that we are never alone, what about what happens in the middle? Well, we pray, and we confess, and we sing, and we give. And those shall be our topics for other Sundays. But for today: hear this Good News – through our worship, God wants **you** to know who you are and Whose you are – whatever the distractions of life, whatever the forces that would isolate you, whatever the demons of your own or others’ making that would tell you that you are not worthy. You are a child of God, a part of God’s family; **that** is what defines you first and last, and it is by knowing that that you will indeed be blessed. May it be so. Amen.