

**WHY WORSHIP?**  
**I Thessalonians 5:12-28**

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on September 8, 2019, the Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia, as the opening sermon of a fall sermon series entitled "Why...?"*

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*But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all.*

*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.*

*May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this. Beloved, pray for us. Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss. I solemnly command you by the Lord that this letter be read to all of them. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.*

*Let us pray: Gracious God, we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from your mouth. Make us hungry for this heavenly food, that it may nourish us today in the ways of eternal life; through Jesus Christ, the bread of heaven. Amen.*

I.

I am about as excited for our church this Fall as I have ever been.

- We have completed four years of seeking to expand our ministry to include a pastor leading each area of our life: worship, mission and pastoral care, youth and young adult ministry, and Christian Formation for children, youth, and adults. When Jacob Bolton begins his ministry with us October 6<sup>th</sup>, pieces will be in place toward which we have labored for a considerable period of time.
- Our membership continues to grow, slightly to be sure, but counter to what is going on in churches and religious institutions of most stripes in America.
- The financial resources you all have provided – through giving, pledging, and gifts and bequests to our endowment – and the hours of behind the scenes management and tracking of over \$2 million dollars of income a year and \$4 million of Foundation monies --have enabled us to fund what we need to fund within our own walls and to expand what we do around the world on the Spirit Lake Indian Reservation in North Dakota, at the United Orphanage and Academy in Moi's Bridge, Kenya, through dozens of agencies and ministries in Alexandria and Arlington, and through mission outings and trips with youth and adults in Arkansas, Appalachia, and around the world.

- Our youth ministry is diversifying and reaching youth and families where they are – just this summer eight Westminster parents read a book entitled *Raising White Kids: Bringing Up Children in a Racially Unjust America*<sup>1</sup>, and met with Whitney exploring its title and subject. Others joined in the reading as well. Such in-depth conversations are as significant as middle schoolers meeting together each week to sample different tacos from different restaurants on “Taco Tuesdays.”
- The music ministry of our church has increased dramatically and the joy its leaders, vocalists, instrumentalists, ringers, children and youth provide *to* and *beyond* our worship is a haven for us in a world that often seems harsh and heartless.
- Though we had email problems this week, one came through yesterday from member Janet Harris:

Thanks again for your fantastic announcement for Tables for 8 last Sunday. It worked miracles. Either Sunday at Lemonade on the Lawn or later this week via e-mail, there were SEVEN “new” people who signed up!! Two other people “new” to Tables for 8 had already signed up after seeing a church bulletin from the week before, so we are now at nine people “new” for Tables for 8. That is a HUGE improvement over recent years.

- In addition to all this, I am personally pleased to have offered, in addition to the Sunday afternoon New Testament survey I was continuing, an Old Testament survey on Wednesday mornings. When we begin this week, we will have fifty-two people on Sunday evening and thirty-seven on Wednesday morning, including 15 people who are from the community. (You still have a few more hours to sign up!) We are even putting a fresh coat of paint and sprucing up a room we have drafted for the Wednesday class!

Toward the middle of the summer, I came to realize that that with the four years of staff retirements, movements, and searches I had become about as tired as I recall ever being in the ministry. The surprising death of my mom in May added the weight of grief to the weight of fatigue. But our vacation happened to be perfectly timed, and coming back, I have been as renewed by the congregation’s enthusiasm as I was when I was first called to this pulpit fifteen years ago; and my spirits are as bright as the new marquee and lighting on the front lawn, the new parking signs in the parking lot, and the freshly polished brass rail in the hallway to the chapel and parlor.

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Earlier this summer I read a book<sup>2</sup> which quotes George Orwell, who in the time of violence and chaos in the middle of the twentieth century, wrote: “...*restatement of the obvious is the first duty of intelligent*” people.<sup>3</sup> It struck me that as we kick off our program year this Fall, I want to build on sermons I preached last Fall – which could be labelled “The Restatement of the Obvious.” I want us to examine another series of questions:

- Why Worship?
- Why Learn?

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<sup>1</sup> The author is Jennifer Harvey and the publishers is Abingdon Press in Nashville, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Wehner, *The Death of Politics: How to Heal Our Frayed Republic After Trump* (New York: HarperCollins, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> From George Orwell, *Facing Unpleasant Facts: Narrative Essays* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008), first published in 1999. Available at <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/3418535-facing-unpleasant-facts>. Quoted in Wehner 30.

- Why Mission?
- Why Community?
- Why Organized Religion?
- Why Involvement?
- Why Giving?

I hope that while I will be “restating the obvious,” I will restate it in ways that remind us *who we are* and *why we are here* in this congregation of God’s people.

## II.

I want to begin with “Why Worship?”

- Why attend church, Sunday morning, nearly every week?
- Why sing hymns, listen to anthems, speak to God to confess our sins, reflect on our lives, ask God’s forgiveness or help or intervention or comfort or understanding?
- Why listen to announcements, sign in on the blue fellowship pads, pass an offering plate?
- Why listen to a reading from an ancient book, then to a sermon based on what has been read, and some Sundays partake of bread and wine?
- Why smile as children come from the four corners of the sanctuary for a sermon geared for them?
- Why smile even more warmly when an infant is carried down the aisle dressed for baptism, the white gown in contrast to the black robe against which he or she is held?
- Why greet and be greeted by people we may know well, know slightly, or know not at all?
- Why worship?

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I have a two-fold answer to this question, among the many answers found in our brief passage today, any of which could draw emphasis.

- These answers come from the oldest known Christian writing, Paul’s letter to the church at Thessalonica.
- It was written about the year 51, seventeen or so years after the death and resurrection of Christ.
- Paul had founded the church at Thessalonica, left for another city, heard that trouble had erupted in the congregation, sent Timothy to check it out, received a good report from Timothy about the life of the congregation.

- In response, writes a positive letter praising the Thessalonians for *sticking with* their faith even though Christ had not yet returned (as they had expected) and even though they lived as a minority in an Empire which worshiped the Roman Emperor and the power of the state and in which concerns they had over the possibility of persecution were not grounded in paranoia or conspiracy-mongering.
- When Paul writes the Thessalonians, he knows they will read his letter as they gather for worship in a home large enough to accommodate the forty of them who will arrive, a home possibly the same size as, but less ornate than our Parlor. Paul “restates the obvious” to the people he loves as a pastor.<sup>4</sup>

### III.

The first thing Paul writes the Thessalonians is “Rejoice.” “Rejoice.” Worship because you know *joy*. Let your worship draw out and express the *joy* you know. “Rejoice.”

You have probably heard people say, if not said yourself, “The reason I come to worship is that it makes me *feel* better.” Often, this statement is accompanied with statements such as:

- I feel peaceful.
- I am able to tune all the noise of the world out.
- It helps my week go better.
- It helps me focus on what I am supposed to be doing, how I am supposed to live.
- It makes me feel grounded, in touch with God, in touch with myself.

One of the earliest short stories Chekhov wrote was entitled “Joy,”<sup>5</sup> and in it, a young man, who lives with his parents and siblings in a drab and cramped 19th century Moscow apartment, burst into the apartment one day filled with exuberant joy because his name has appeared in the newspaper. He has received attention. He is famous. He is somebody now. But it turns out his name is in the paper because, intoxicated, he has been involved in a carriage accident. With sly Chekhovian humor, we as readers are led to ask ourselves: “What is it that we *think* will bring us joy but that is leading us to miss ‘where true joys are to be found.’”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Most of this background information comes from Raymond F. Collins, “The First Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians,” in *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 2115-2116; Edgar M. Krentz, “The First Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians,” in *The HarperCollins Study Bible, Fully Revised and Updated, New Revised Standard Version, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books With Concordance* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 2005-2006.

<sup>5</sup> Anton Chekhov, “Joy,” in *Early Short Stories: 1883-1888*, edited by Shelby Foote, translated by Constance Garnett (New York: The Modern Library, 1999), 3-5.

<sup>6</sup> “A General Prayer,” Funeral Service, *The Book of Common Worship*, (Philadelphia: The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1946), 211.

Theologian Paul Tillich wrote:

Joy is nothing else than the awareness of our being fulfilled in our *true* being, in our *personal* center....

It is *reality* that gives joy, and reality alone.

The Bible speaks so often of joy because it is the most *realistic* of all books.

Tillich continues:

“Rejoice!”

That means “Penetrate from what *seems* to be real to that which is *really* real.”<sup>7</sup>

In the mid-1980s an elder in the church I was serving in Houston was a Ph. D. chemist in his late twenties or early thirties, which was my age at that time. He worked at the Shell research labs, located near the church, and was a diligent elder and one of the nicest people I have known. One Sunday, while he was picking up bulletins in the pews, he approached me with almost a childlike look of wonder on his face. It was after a stewardship sermon, and he said:

My favorite show is *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* [one of the first reality TV programs whose title is self-explanatory].

He then said: “I realize that that is not what life is about. That’s not what gives *joy*. Joy is being here....in touch with God. In touch with who I really am.

To the Thessalonians crowded in their living room with drapes drawn in respite or perhaps hiding from the Emperor who claims to *be* all and *know* all, Paul writes “Rejoice.” “Rejoice.”

#### IV.

A second *concept* worth lifting up from Paul’s letter concerning “why worship” is this: *character*. We worship because it strengthens our *character*.

Following his call to rejoice, Paul exhorts:

Do not despise the words of prophets,  
But *test* everything;  
*Hold fast* to what is good;  
*Abstain* from every form of evil.

Worship builds *character*.

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Tillich, “The Meaning of Joy,” in *The New Being* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1955), 146.

I know that the building of character is about as old-fashioned as reading a Jane Austen novel or reminiscing about the days the University of Chicago won a national championship in football.<sup>8</sup> But no matter how “old fashioned” character-building may seem, it is still the task of the human creature – especially those who believe or seek to believe in God – to hold *character* up as crucial to what it means to be human.

Character is simply having the judgement, discipline, and strength to “hold fast to what is good” and to “abstain from every form of evil.” It means saying “yes” to this and “no” to that.

It is easier to cultivate character when we have come to know through *the joy of worship* – even if “in a mirror darkly”<sup>9</sup> – *who we are* and *who God is*.

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The Roman poet Juvenal, writing about fifty years after Paul, satirized the corruption of the Roman citizenry and their worship of the Emperor. He criticized “the common people” who once upon a time had participated in the politics and life of their local community, but who now had come to allow themselves to be kept happy and docile by a steady diet of trivializing entertainment.

[We] have abdicated our duties [Juvenal wrote]...

People who once upon a time handed out military command, high civil offices, legions...now [restrain ourselves] and [hope] for just two things: bread and circuses.<sup>10</sup>

Sounds chilling. My friends, we can do better than “bread and circuses,” better than pizza on the sofa and eyes glued to a screen in our hand or pasted across the largest wall in our home. Character doesn’t grown from “bread and circuses,” from *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, not even from “Lifestyles of the Un-rich and Un-famous.” Among other worthy places, character comes from being *here*, in *worship*, Sunday after Sunday. *Character comes from worship*.

Hold fast to what is good;  
Abstain from every form of evil.

“Yes” to this. “No” to that.

Joy and character. This is why we worship.

Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> The University of Chicago Maroons won the Big Ten and National Championships in 1905. Football was eliminated from the University in 1933.

<sup>9</sup> I Corinthians 13:12.

<sup>10</sup> Wehner 228.