

Six Great Ends of the Church
III. The Maintenance of Divine Worship
First Reading - Psalm 29
Second Reading - Hebrews 12:28-29

“Aunt Bee, preachin’ don’t start til...”

“Oh, I know, I know, but we want to get a good seat and it’s bound to be crowded with that visiting preacher.”

“Just ‘cause he’s from New York...”

“It’s because he’s famous and everybody’s read his book.”

“I ain’t.”

“Well, you, all you read...”

“Now Aunt Bee, I hold with Reverend Tucker ... He’s good enough for me ... We’ve been takin’ from Rev. Tucker a good many years, and I ain’t about to change.”

“Andy, they’re both on the same side ... Go on, Opie, you get dressed. You, too, Andy.”

Somehow, the Taylor family along with Barney, Gomer, and Clara all make it to All Souls Church on time, where they crowd into the front row (a reminder that these shows were fictional).

The organ plays, the people stand, their hymnals open ... *“Holy Spirit, Power divine; Fill and nerve this will of mine.”*

Rev. Tucker introduces his renowned friend, Dr. Everett Breen, who steps to the pulpit and says, *“As I stood there during the singing of the hymn I asked myself, ‘What message have I to bring to these good people of Mayberry?’”* Of course, I’m thinking, “Buddy, if you’re just coming to that question now, you’d never make it as a Presbyterian.” Yet, he proceeds to critique the culture’s obsession with busy-ness as the measure of human worth. Not a bad message, actually. However, before Rev. Breen gets through the first point, Gomer’s neck has gone to rubber, and he’s snoring. Barney’s fighting a losing battle with his eyelids, while Opie is focused on catching a buzzing fly with a single attack.

Now, someone on the production team for the Andy Griffith Show had to have some church experience, because the acting was spot on when compared to what we see from up here week to week, the Sandman posing

a greater threat than the devil after the preacher says, *Listen now, for the word of God.*

Well, following the service, Andy Taylor and family were out in front of the church to greet Dr. Breen — “*Your sermon had such a wonderful lesson for us.*” — “*Yes, sir, you really hit the nail right on the head there.*” — And Barney Fife chimes in, “*Yes, sir, that's one subject you can't talk enough about... sin.*” And isn't it classic when Andy pulls Barney aside — “*He didn't talk about sin.*”

As I said, whoever wrote that script had been to church, bringing to mind all those times through the years someone praised me for something I don't think I ever said. I guess the Holy Spirit is indeed a mystery ... and to much of the world it remains a mystery that we gather week after week, year after year; and though we may battle heavy eyelids, pesky flies, and miss the subtleties of the sermon, we continue to come back.

A group of friends recently expressed their amazement that if you took all the people in all the NFL stadiums on a Sunday and added them up, the total number would pale in comparison to the number of people who still attend church each Sunday across the land. I had lunch this week with

the impressive Father Patrick Cahill, the priest practically next door at St. Matthew Catholic Church, which is perhaps the largest Catholic parish in the country, with 40,000 families. Each weekend includes 6 masses adding up to 9000 members attending worship. That should be worth an NIL deal from *Red Bull*. Our neighbors down in Blakeney report 17,000 Elevators coming to worship at one of their 20 campuses each week.

Yet, what is even more amazing is that though one would assume the megachurches have all the people around Charlotte, there are probably far more collective worshipers in the small churches that have a significant footprint throughout the city and the surrounding countryside.

A majority of Presbyterian Churches have 100 or fewer members. This morning at Robinson Presbyterian Church over on Harrisburg Road, there are around 30 people faithfully gathering for worship. On the west side of Charlotte, 35 folks are singing hymns together at Pleasant Grove Presbyterian Church. Over on Old Providence Rd, volunteers at Matthews-Murkland Presbyterian are busily preparing Communion for around 50 worshippers, while to the West of us, my colleague Mark Lee at Central Steele Creek Presbyterian is stepping into the pulpit with a sermon prepared

for 70+ faithful members. Our dear friend and choir veteran Cindy Fisher is serving the elements to 15 congregants at Christ Presbyterian up off of Wilkinson Blvd. In all, there are 92 congregations in the Presbytery of Charlotte stretching from Davidson through Charlotte and down East to Hamlet, all with cars in the parking lot, bulletins in the hands of ushers, choirs robing up, prayers being lifted, the Word of God proclaimed, baptisms being celebrated, and grape juice being served by means of goblets, plastic cups, or mini shot glasses along with the words, *The blood of Christ shed for you.*

N.T. Wright wrote that worship *“is the glad shout of praise that arises to God the creator and God the rescuer from the creation that recognizes its maker, the creation that acknowledges the triumph of Jesus the Lamb.”*

Why do we worship? Why do we make the effort to corral the kids, tame the cowlicks, navigate the baby along with requisite accoutrements to the nursery, and plop exhausted in a pew before the first hymn? Well, because God told us to. Worship is called for by our Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer. *“Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your*

God.” The first four of the ten commandments establish the rationale and the focus for worship. The Psalmist sings, *“Worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness; tremble before him, all the earth!”* Our psalm for today instructs us — *“Ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name; worship the Lord in holy splendor.”*

Jesus said, *“God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”* The author of Hebrews entreats us in the name of Christ — *“let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.”* And, in our text for today from Hebrews 12, the author directs us — *“Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe.”*

Why do we worship? If nothing else, to remind ourselves that despite the speeding hamster wheel lives we lead in our culture, God is God, and we ... are ... not. Consider the imagery of today’s psalm — *“The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty ... The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare; and in his temple all say, ‘Glory!’* Here, the Psalmist uses an image that we can perceive, an image

that can elicit awe — the power of the storm (This week we were amazed by the scope and power of Hurricane Melissa, a Category 5 storm with winds at landfall topping 185 miles per hour, a force as fast as a Formula 1 car, but 1½ times the size of Germany. The psalmist cites the storm imagery to point to a power far greater than the tempest, sort of a — *You think that's powerful, wait 'til you perceive the intensity of God.* Elsewhere, the Psalmist ponders the power and reach of God — “*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?*”

When Job questioned God's wisdom, the Lord's response offered a heaping helping of clarity — “*Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! ... who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?*”

And when meditating on the sovereignty and power of God, the author of Hebrews tells us — “*Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an*

acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire.”

On the night of November 23rd, 1654, the Feast of St. Clement, the Vigil of St. Chrysogonus, the great mathematician Blaise Pascal, a convert to Christian discipleship, experienced a forceful, irresistible vision of God. In his journal he wrote — *“From about half past ten at night until about half past midnight, **FIRE** ... GOD of Abraham, GOD of Isaac, GOD of Jacob not of the philosophers and of the learned. Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace. GOD of Jesus Christ. My God and your God. Your GOD will be my God.”* The intensity of God’s presence and force elicited an awe that left Pascal speechless but for one descriptor — *Fire!* ... *“Our God is a consuming fire,”* the author of Hebrews unapologetically states.

Do we understand the power we invoke when we utter God’s name? The ancient Israelites understood the name itself to carry such power that they would not speak it. When the name of God, *Yahweh*, came up in Scripture, they would substitute the word for Lord, *Adonai*. Thus, the Psalmist asserts — *“Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!”*

Why do we worship? God is God and we are not, an important weekly recentering and a reminder that the world we assume we are carrying on our shoulders, the world over which we fret and stew, is actually God's world, a power that transcends all earthly authority, a power with purpose, and yet, at the same time, a power, a God, who knows us each by name, holds us close, understands our fears, hears our prayers, and in Christ Jesus reveals to us a kingdom that will not be shaken, and an ultimate purpose through a love that will not fail.

Consider this word from an earlier edition of the Book of Order – *“The Reformed Tradition has emphasized the importance of the Lord’s Day as the time for hearing the Word and celebrating the Sacraments in the expectation of encountering the risen Lord, and for responding in prayer and service.*

Inured to the habit of consumerism, the question very often asked on the way to brunch after worship is — *What did you get out of church today?* Michael Lindvall suggests that is the wrong question. He offers that what we should be asking is — What did you lose in that service? What burden did you drop at the foot of the cross? What pride did you shed? What gnawing anger are you going home without? What world borne lie do you no longer

believe? Who is your strength and salvation? Who do you serve at the pleasure of?

You know, in the coming years, I know that I will not miss these blasted sleeves always getting in the way, or tripping over the hem of this oversized dress, or wearing this irritating headpiece like I'm Mick Jagger strutting and confessing he can't get no satisfaction for the ten-millionth time ... but I will miss this, gathered in community around God's Word, hearing the voice of a child calling us to worship, listening to Laura's flute, hearing the choir's harmonies, seeing the children and knowing what a special experience they will have with Rebecca in Children's Church, hearing the laughter in the narthex, feeling that catch in the throat as I see someone taking their place in the pew after a long hard journey through illness or loss, laughing with the college kid who actually wanted to be here with you in this place, as together we practice the presence of God. *"The Lord is in his holy temple..."* I believe that.

Why do we worship? Perhaps the great Reformer John Calvin expresses it well — *"We are not our own: let not our reason nor our will, therefore, sway our plans and deeds. We are not our own: let us therefore not*

set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own: in so far as we can, let us therefore forget ourselves and all that is ours. Conversely, we are God's: let us therefore live for him and die for him. We are God's: let his wisdom and will therefore rule all our actions. We are God's: let all the parts of our life accordingly strive toward him as our only lawful goal." As Paul counseled long ago, *"Do not neglect to meet together."* For this is the house of the Lord. Amen.