

Wesley United Methodist Church

Rev. Beverly E Stenmark

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Dwelling and Indwelling

Text: Exodus 32:1-14

Philippians 4:4-9

Title: The Pillar of Worship and Praise

I really do enjoy watching the HGTV shows – especially “Property Brothers” and “Fixer Upper”. I like to see what they do with the houses they are renovating. There is a great deal of predictability to both the format of the shows and quite often to what they discover when they start to tear out walls. The format of the shows might be called the blueprint – it is the frame upon which the show hangs.

Usually when they start to tear out walls they discover something that supposedly they didn’t expect. Very often at least part of the discussion is about a support wall, or a beam or column that is needed to help support the building. Without the proper supports, a building cannot stand.

Last week we talked about the importance of a strong foundation for our church and our Christian life with Christ being the cornerstone around which everything else is oriented and upon which everything else is built.

Once that foundation is in place, however, there are other support beams, walls, or pillars that are necessary to support the church and the Christian life. In coming weeks, we will be talking about the pillars of nurture, outreach, and witness; all of which are essential. Today, however, we focus on the pillar, wall, or beam of worship and praise.

We seem to have recognized the importance of the pillar of worship and praise to such an extent that when we talk about “going to church” – we generally understand that to mean that we are going to Sunday morning worship. Other times when we come to the church building we tend to say,

“I’m going to a meeting” or “I have choir rehearsal tonight” or something like that, but colloquially “going to church” means “going to worship”.

The pillar of worship and praise is a critical pillar for the church and for our Christian life. I say this even while almost all churches report declines in the number of people who attend the primary worship service of the week. Sometimes this means that there are fewer overall people attending worship, but it also often means that the people who attend worship do so less frequently than they did in the past. There are so many reasons for this including a statistic that I read a few years ago when I lived in Maine that 47% of people in Maine worked on Sundays. This is probably similar in Rhode Island, Massachusetts and elsewhere. This is not the time or place to try to get into all of the reasons why worship attendance is on the decline, but given the importance of worship - but it is an important piece to consider.

It is important not only for the church as a body – but it is also important for us as individuals. We all live busy lives with multiple demands upon our time, and most of those demands are for good or important things. We find ourselves having to make decisions about what to do and what not to do. Once we make the decision to do or not do something, it is easier to make that same decision again and again. Soon we can discover that we no longer have to think about the decision – the new behavior becomes the new habit and the old behavior becomes the exception and sometimes that happens when people attend worship with less and less frequency.

But really, what is worship? Worship is not the wonderful music that the choir provides. Worship is not the amount of money we put in the offering plate. Worship is not the beautiful stained-glass windows. They

are acts or expressions of worship; they may help us worship but they are not worship in and of themselves. Worship can be formal and traditional, or informal and casual, or exciting and contemporary or some mixture of all of these – but none of these are worship by themselves. Worship really is adoration, honoring, loving God. It is paying attention to God and what God wants for our lives. Worship is putting God first in all that we say, all that we do, in every part of our lives.

We are discovering more and more that there are some unexpected benefits to worship. Several recent medical studies have indicated that people who participate in worship services on a regular basis have as much as a 50% decrease in the likelihood of dying a premature death.ⁱ

Attending worship doesn't decrease our chances of getting cancer or cardio-vascular disease but it can help us cope with them better than people who never attend worship.

Tyler VanderWeele, a professor of epidemiology at T.H. Chan School of Public Health at Harvard and the author of one of these studies said that “Religious attendance is a relatively good determinant of health. ... It is perhaps an under-appreciated health resource”ⁱⁱ

We may find that as we attend or participate in worship we find our lives making more sense. We realize that we are not alone when we face difficulties in life. When we share with the community of faith those things that are weighing heavily on our minds we discover that we are not alone. There may be others who have experienced something similar and who will gladly walk the path with us because they know how much it means to have someone walk with us in those times.

When we listen to the news and find ourselves wanting to scream, we may find in worship a place that grounds us and helps us to put things into

perspective so that we can more clearly articulate why we believe what we believe, why we think certain things are very important and maybe even non-negotiable. We discover that there are others who are seeking to be faithful to God, to walk a life of faith and with whom we can talk, find support, encouragement, and strength.

In today's scripture reading from Exodus, when Moses went up on the mountain to talk with God, he was gone for what seemed like a long time to the people who remained behind. These people had experienced significant trauma in their escape from Egypt. They had seen God, through Moses, protect them from the Egyptians who were pursuing them. They had seen the waters of the Red Sea separate so that they could escape on dry land. They had seen their pursuers drown when the waters closed again around them. They were now dependent upon God even for their daily food and water. Each morning they would go out and gather the food that God had provided during the night.

With Moses being gone, their anxiety level increased. They may have wondered if he was even still alive so they decided to take matters into their own hands. They knew what God had done for them, but now it seemed as if Moses and God were both absent, so they went to Moses' brother Aaron and asked him to build a god for them to worship. This was their coping mechanism to ease their anxiety.

If we think about the first of the ten commandments that God gave to Moses, we remember that it is, "you shall have no other gods before me." They had been told not to make any idols to worship and yet, here they were doing exactly that.

We may not make the same kind of idols today, but all too often we have other idols, other things that we have allowed to become more

important to us than God. I wonder if this multiplicity of idols is one of the reasons that we find ourselves worshiping less. You may remember a mantra, that became very popular in the 1990's: WWJD – What would Jesus do? It became a model for followers of Jesus to use as a moral imperative to make the decisions that would be consistent with what Jesus would do.

When I was pastoring during that time, I would often remind people that sometimes what Jesus would want them to do would be to go to their child or grandchild's soccer game, or go out to eat with their spouse. WWJD did not always mean being in the church building every time it was open.

However, it also was and still is a good way to be sure that we are making our decisions, establishing our priorities, based on what should be the cornerstone of our lives – Jesus. When we stop using that as our cornerstone, the entire foundation starts to fall apart.

The story is told of a pastor who went to visit a parishioner who had not been in worship for quite a while. As they sat there quietly, the parishioner started trying to explain why he had not been in worship. He talked about how busy he had been and how he could worship God just as well in the woods, or sitting on his porch, or by himself. He was probably expecting the pastor to give him an argument, but the wise pastor didn't do that. He listened carefully, and then slowly reached out to the fire burning in the fireplace. He took one of the hot embers and silently moved it away from the fire. For a time, the ember continued to glow but then its glow became less and less and finally it appeared to be just a cold piece of coal sitting off by itself. Still the pastor said nothing. Then he picked up the ember and placed it back in the fire, where it once again began to glow and

burn brightly. The parishioner said, simply, “Yes, now I understand. I will be in worship on Sunday.”

You see, while we certainly can and should worship God in the woods, or by the ocean, or on our porch – or even in our bed – it is much harder to keep the fire burning when we are removed from the community of faith.

The Hebrew people waiting for Moses to return understood some of this – they needed a god – they needed something they could see, or something that helped them to stay focused instead of wandering off by themselves. A faith community often provides stability, comfort, and support that can be most helpful in times of difficulty.

Paul certainly believes that this is important. In today’s reading from his letter to the Philippians he writes, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say Rejoice.” Paul wasn’t a person who was lost in a dream world. At the time he was writing to the believers in Philippi he was in prison, and likely believed that his life would end soon. From a prison cell, he wrote, “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which surpasses understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”

Even though he was facing death, there was a peace in his heart – a peace that is impossible to understand apart from knowing that God is with you. Paul tells us to bring all our needs to God in prayer, and at the same time giving thanks to God. Again, this is not ignoring what is happening, but it is a reality that when we bring things to God in prayer we can discover that our attitude changes. Prayer is not an escape but it is a practice of regarding the same painful situation from another angle, from

the perspective of being open to the many ways that God may lead us to consider or to respond.

Last week, during our prayer time a celebration was raised about Jerry being able to walk all the way through the sanctuary and up to the choir and to join in singing with the choir. We rejoiced in this, we expressed our gratitude to God through spontaneous applause. This is the spirit of Philippians. We could, instead, continue to lament that Jerry can't walk as well as he used to, and can't do the things he used to do, but Jerry and Linda's choice and ours is to give thanks that God has helped them deal with this during the past year and that God has walked every step with them.

Fred Rogers, a Presbyterian minister and the star of the children's show Mister Roger's Neighborhood said that "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'" For me, that is another illustration of how bringing the tough things to God in prayer with thanksgiving gives us a different perspective and allows us to be open to what God can do, often with our help. This makes these times a time of worship.

For me, that means, that when we hear about horrible things like the recent mass shooting in Las Vegas or the terrible fires in California, we certainly pray for those who are killed or traumatized, but we also look for and pray in thanksgiving for those who tried to get others out of the way, for those who provided emergency medical assistance, for those who have put their lives on hold to fight the fires. When we do that, we are more likely to also think not only about the ways we can be helpful in these situations, but

also the ways we can be helpful when those closer to us are experiencing trauma.

We may begin to recognize those who are willing to sit with us when we are facing trouble and give thanks to God for people who show God's love in that way. We may begin to recognize that we are part of a community of faith who is there when we are in trouble and we do not need to face difficulties alone.

Worship, prayer, being open to God in new ways – it is all part of that first critical pillar in our Christian life – worship and praise. It builds upon the cornerstone of Jesus and along with the other pillars it will support, sustain, and grow the Church and our Christian life.

“How lovely is your dwelling place, O God.”

ⁱ Roberts, Emby. www.today.com 6/3/17 discussing study by Marino Bruce at Vanderbilt University

ⁱⁱ Holohan, Meghan. www.today.com 5/16/16 discussing study by Tyler VanderWeele at T.H. Chan School of Public Health at Harvard.