

1. Today is the fourth Sunday in our series about worship. Today we'll focus on one of the specific words in our series title – “Let's Get *Together* ... for God's sake.”
 - a. A story that I first heard in a church service when I was 8 or 9...
 - b. A pastor goes to visit a man in the congregation who hasn't been attending. As they sit by the fireplace and talk, the man explains that he has not stepped away from the church. Rather, he says, he has chosen to worship on his own each Sunday morning, because that's where he can find God. From time to time, the pastor got up to stir the fire, and one of the occasions, the pastor pulled out one of the red-hot coals and set it on the hearth. Eventually, as the fire in the fireplace continued to burn and to heat the room, the coal on the hearth died down and quit burning. After a time, the pastor pointed to the stone and said, “That's what happens, my friend, when we as Christians choose to leave the community. Our fire can continue for a time, and it will stay warm for a while, but eventually it becomes very difficult to remain on fire for God when we are in isolation.”
 - c. Two points I want to bring out from that story. First, I agree with the theology that Pastor John Ropp described to me close to 40 years ago. We're created to worship and live together, to praise God and worship in the redeemed community.
 - d. I understand that it's possible to worship when we're by ourselves:
 - i. Last week, Neil talked of worshiping in the sacred spaces of Rocky Mountain National Park.
 - ii. I can think of times when I have worshiped alone, or with my family, also often in the context of nature—in the Grand Canyon on a hike with Ryan, on the Apache Trail east of Phoenix, eight miles into a run on the Millrace Path.
 - iii. I get that you can worship by yourself.
 - iv. But last week, Neil preached a very powerful sermon about the idols that get in the way of our worship – sports, money, nationalism, even family. He said that if he failed to offend everyone at some point, he apologized. Perhaps not intentionally, he left an idol for me to talk about—he hinted about it when he talked about “personal comfort and convenience.” The idol that I'd like to name is that of our “individualism”—that my needs, my preferences, are what life revolves around.

- e. Rather than make corporate worship a priority, many Americans are like the old man preacher John talked about – we believe we can sustain our spirituality on our own. Many people today see little reason to connect our search for God with the church and its practices.
 - i. “But we cannot grow into Christ-likeness without the support and guidance of a faith community,” says the book *Preparing Sunday Dinner*. “Just as an infant cannot survive without a family to provide its physical and emotional needs, a new Christian needs sisters and brothers ... to ensure growth and health. Community is a [central] element of Christian faith; without a connection with the body of Christ, we wither and die. And the common worship of the Christian community is the experience that binds us most effectively into one body, making us a people who reflect the light of Christ in the world.”¹
- f. The words the guys read for you from the book of Deuteronomy are at the heart of God’s instructions for us, including in our worship. In Jewish liturgy, this is the lead paragraph of the *Shema*, which the faithful are instructed to recite twice daily. “Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.” When Jesus is asked, “What is the greatest commandment?”, he starts with the *Shema*: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and soul.”
- g. Loving God with *all* of our heart, *all* of our soul, and *all* of our strength is another way of saying that worship, true spirituality, permeates *all* of life.
 - i. In vs. 7, we go on to read that this covenant, this command, is a family matter – “Impress these words on your children,” Moses says.²
 - 1. And we must remember that in the Old Testament, nearly every time a reference to the family is made, it means “extended” family. The notion of the nuclear family of Mom, Dad, and 1.7 kids in a house with a white picket fence, is pretty rare.
 - ii. And also in vs. 7, we read that the covenant is a public matter. It’s not enough to talk about it when you are in the comfort of your own home, you should talk about it when you walk along the road as well.³
 - iii. And in vss. 8 and 9, we see that the covenant is a declaration to all! We should lodge these words in our hands and on our foreheads, in

¹ Marlene Kropf, in *Preparing Sunday Dinner*, Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2005, p. 27.

² Daniel I. Block, *The NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy*, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2012, p. 184.

³ Block, p. 185.

what we do and in how we think. We should write them on our doorframes and on our gates, just as we did on the night of the first Passover.⁴

- h. Worship, then, was seen as a teaching moment in the gathered community. Cindy talked about worship transforming us. For those of us that are “heart” worshipers, we may be especially transformed in the music and the prayers. Those of us who are “head” worshipers may be especially transformed in the preaching and teaching of the word. But in either case, we are transformed when we worship God together, with all of our hearts, minds, and souls.
- i. The words the women said are from one of the great teaching Psalms. A lot of the Psalms are short, but Zoë, Melanie, and Sharon read just the first four verses of Psalm 78. In terms of verses, it’s the second longest of all the Psalms.
- j. Psalm 78 is a historical psalm – after the opening verses that they read, the chapter goes on to tell the story of the Israelites in two cycles that show
 - i. God’s marvelous deeds for Israel;
 - ii. Instances of Israel’s failure;
 - iii. a description of God’s wrath;
 - iv. and the restoration of God to God’s people.⁵
- k. But it’s not a historical psalm in the sense of reciting facts and figures, dates and names. Rather, it’s an interpretation of that history. It’s composed as a speech that might be said at one of the great festivals. There a priest or prophet would tell the story of God’s glorious deeds, the rebellion of their ancestors, and of God’s judgment and compassion. The purpose is to recall God’s formative acts, so that every generation may know God’s hope and be inspired to obedience.⁶
- l. This storytelling psalm is a central part of Israelite worship. In fact, I discovered that the center verses of this particular psalm even make up the central verses of the entire book of Psalms.⁷
- m. Remembering and telling the story of God in worship are essential to the people of God. So much so that James Waltner even calls “remembering

⁴ Block, p. 186.

⁵ J. Clinton McCann, *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. 4: Psalms*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996, p. 990.

⁶ James Waltner, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: Psalms*, Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2006, p. 380.

⁷ According to Waltner, 385, Ps. 78:38-39 are the middle of the 5,896 verses of the Psalms. I didn’t figure this out myself!

and telling” the 11th commandment! We tell the stories to lead to the praise of God and to nurture a heart of obedience.⁸

2. Which brings me to the second key point from Preacher John’s story about the pastor and his visit. This isn’t a point from the story itself, rather it’s about the storytelling setting. Do you remember when I first heard it? I said that was perhaps 8 or 9, sitting on those hard benches of Fairview Mennonite Church.
3. From time to time, I am asked why Waterford doesn’t have a separate “children’s church” as some congregations do. Interestingly, this past fall I attended a conference with pastors from a number of denominations, exploring how we can make faith “stick” for youth and young adults. As part of the question-and-answer time, a number of people asked what they could do to move away from a children’s church model to one that included everyone together in worship. They recognized that faith has a greater chance of “sticking” when worship happens in the entire gathered community, rather than in segmented sections of the congregation.
4. To that question, I believe that texts like Deuteronomy 6 and Psalm 78, and the story of the fireplace, offer a response. As Anabaptists, we believe that children of all ages should worship together. Perhaps as early as next Sunday, we’ll welcome our newest child of God into our gathered worship—Heath Yoder, Julie & Eric’s son who was born this past Friday morning. And if she was physically able, I’m sure that Helen Mann, a child of God who turns 103 this coming Friday, would be with us today. Children and youth, you are not the church of tomorrow—you are part of the church of today. Seniors at Greencroft and still living at home, your time is not past—you are part of the church of today.
5. Last week, Neil named our idolatry of “families,” going as far as suggesting that for many, including many of us as Mennonites, sometimes we worship “family” more than we worship God. I am the “pastor of family life,” so of course I think that families are important. But sometimes we have taken that too far. Just as we think our worship is about meeting our needs, we think that church, and our worship, is about pleasing our families. We’re concerned that our worship is not “hip” enough, not “entertaining” enough for our children and youth.
 - a. I have news for you, my friend—it’s not the pastor’s job, it’s not the worship leader’s job, to “entertain” you and your children.⁹ If you want entertainment, go to the bowling alley. Entertainment can happen this afternoon when you sit down and play “Settlers of Catan.” Or “Dutch Blitz.” Or that 50th game of “Guess Who.” **“Here we are to worship!”**

⁸ Waltner, p. 385.

⁹ Robbie Castleman, *Parenting in the Pew: Guiding Your Children into the Joy of Worship*, 2nd ed., Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, 2002, p. 58.

- b. Now don't get me wrong! Do we as pastors sit at our staff meeting and ask the question, "How best can we bore our eight-year-olds this week?" Of course not. Rather, we ask, "How can we plan a worshipful diet that is age-appropriate for all of God's children, from Heath Yoder to Helen Mann?"
 - i. That's why we give intentional efforts to planning a children's time on a regular basis.
 - ii. We try to use stories in our sermons that can connect to all ages. It would be wonderful, children, if 40 years from now, those of you that are pastoring (and I do believe some of you will be!), would recall stories of Jesus and his followers that you first heard in these very seats.
 - iii. We try to sing songs that connect with all ages. Today doesn't have many traditional hymns, but we also have Sundays when that is the bulk of our singing.
 - iv. When we take communion in a little bit, children of all ages will be invited to come forward for a blessing as we celebrate the sacraments of Jesus.
- c. Now parents, there will be days when we say, "I didn't get a thing out of worship today," when we feel so frazzled that we will ask, "Why did I even come?" But there will also be days when you are at home, perhaps standing at the sink doing dishes, and you will hear your child in the other room, singing, "Here we are to worship, here we are to bow down."
 - i. And you will realize that being in church wasn't about you. It was about "the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done." And it's about telling those deeds to the coming generation.
- d. In the midst of parenting challenges, there are things that we can do. I recently came across a book called *Parenting in the Pew*, which will be in the library soon. It gives a number of ideas about how we can guide our children into the joy of worship. It's written for parents, but I'm going to invite everyone to listen in, since there's a role we can all play for our children. Here's just a few examples from the book:
 - i. As you come to the end of the week, remember that Sunday morning starts on Saturday night. The author claims that it's a scientific fact that more socks are lost on Sunday morning than any other day of the week. So lay them out with your church clothes on Saturday night. And prepare the offering on Saturday night, so it's not just one more detail to take care of on Sunday morning.¹⁰

¹⁰ Castleman, p. 43.

- ii. And when you get to church on Sunday, rather than seeing it as a boring event to be endured, see it as a teachable moment. Robbie Castleman suggests that for many of us, teaching our children to be quiet in church is more about making us look good as parents than it is about worshiping God. Rather than focusing on holding still, we should be teaching our children that the only “proper behavior” for church ... is to worship!¹¹
- iii. So how can we teach our children to worship? One of Castleman’s points is that sometimes teaching our children to “be quiet” means that we as parents will actually talk more during worship!¹²
 - 1. Parents, it’s okay to whisper together as you help your child find a Bible passage, or to answer their questions about a particular word in a scripture or a song as they follow along.
 - 2. It’s okay to ask your child what the instrumental music in the offertory makes them think about.
 - 3. When Neil leads in the pastoral prayer in a few minutes, it’s okay to follow along in the bulletin with your eyes open, pointing to each of the items as Neil prays for it.
 - 4. It’s okay to explain to your children what the peace lamp is about, or why there is a knot in the cross right there. (And if you don’t know the answer yourself, ask Glenn Reinford! In fact, here’s my challenge for you as a family – the first child who can talk to Glenn (that’s Jeremy and David and Susannah’s grandpa) and send me an email with the explanation, and the Bible verse it comes from, we’ll put it in the *Buzz* with your name, and I’ll give you a Dairy Queen gift card, for you and for your parent!)
- iv. Those of us without children, there are other things we can do as well for the benefit of our children. For example,
 - 1. Ask a parent if you can help out during the service. Ask if you can sit with their family so that you, too, can help their children learn about worship.
 - 2. As you look around, don’t get worked up when you realize that we give permission for our children to **safely** stand on the benches or chairs beside their parents so that they can follow along in the *Hymnal* as we sing.

¹¹ Castleman, p. 23.

¹² Castleman, p. 67.

3. Or you can ask the child sitting nearby to tap you on the knee each time they hear the word “God,” or “Jesus,” or the “Spirit.”
6. After all, worship is about the gathered community. It always has been. It always will be, even unto eternity.
 - a. In the book that I referenced earlier, Marlene Kropf says that worship in the gathered community is the surest antidote to the sin of individualism.¹³ That’s why this morning I asked Christa to change the words in one of the songs, to get it out of “I” language – that’s why we sang: “Here **we are** to worship, here **we are** to bow down.”
 - b. When you think about it, there is very little that we can do that is more countercultural in a society that worships the individual than to worship God instead. And to do it together, with brothers and sisters. And perhaps the best way to worship God together is in the countercultural practice of taking communion together.
7. Because it was on a night so many years ago, when the disciples were gathered... How? Together, in an upstairs room. ...
8. And Jesus took bread, and he broke it. And he said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this, in remembrance of me.” ...

¹³ Kropf, pp. 27-28.