



Pastor's Update

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LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF HOPE

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By Pastor Merv Thompson

"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." (2 Cor. 13:14).

Quiz time. What is the most important priority for Lutheran Church of Hope? For any congregation? What is the most important action we do together? Where do we direct the majority of our resources, our energy, our passion? This is a foundational question, challenging every congregation and denomination. What defines the essence of who we are as the body of Christ?

The answer very simply is "worship." Worship is the center of our life together, worship is our highest priority. We can still be the church without buildings or pastors or staff or constitutions or committees, but we cannot be the church without worship. A church which has dynamic and compelling worship is usually a congregation which is thriving.

Conversely, a congregation which de-emphasizes worship, which relegates this essential activity to second-class status, is usually a church in decline. Worship is God's creative and redeeming action in our midst, worship is what feeds the soul and inspires the spirit, worship is what brings transformation to the mind, worship is what creates unity.

The Psalmist understood the power of worship. Psalm 95, *"O come, let us sing to the Lord, let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise...O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord our maker!"* Worship is singing, it is a joyful noise, it is thanksgiving, it is bowing down before God. Nothing can take the place of worship.

Our Lutheran tradition is rich with the language and meaning of worship, often explained in the important concepts of Word and Sacrament. Pastors are ordained and installed into Word and Sacrament ministry, congregations are called to herald and participate in Word and Sacrament.

We have the Word powerfully present in the Scripture readings, in the music, in the liturgy, in the preaching, in the confessions, in the creeds, in our very words of response. We have the Sacraments in Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Sacraments by definition have a three-fold emphasis: instituted by Jesus Christ, contain a ma-

terial element (bread and wine, water) and give a spiritual blessing. Lutheran Church of Hope is centered in both Word and Sacraments.

Giving worship center stage seems a no-brainer. But reality is often stranger than fiction. In a rather cursory study I did some years ago, I learned that most Lutheran congregations do not offer worship at prime time. My own sense is that prime time is somewhere around the 10 AM hour on Sunday morning, it can be 9:30 or 9:45, or even 10:15 or 10:30. This hour is not prime time for everyone, but for a larger percentage than any other time.

But the overwhelming majority of Lutheran congregations today have no worship service at prime time. The most common schedule for churches which have two worship services is to have one quite early in the morning, 8:00 to 8:30 AM and then one late in the morning, say 11:00 or 11:15. Very few congregations actually have worship in the middle of Sunday morning.

What astounds me about this is that I cannot think of any other institution that would not schedule its most important action at prime time. It is almost like a restaurant closing over the lunch hour, perhaps being open from 9:00 to 11:00 AM and then again from 1:00 to 3:00 PM. Doesn't make any sense at all. Or it is like a supermarket closing from 5:00 to 6:00 PM to get ready for the evening hours, completely missing the after-work barage. But yet this is what we do in the church.

Why do we do this? Perhaps it is because worship is not understood as the most important activity we do. Churches so often give prime time on Sunday morning to Sunday School, or Adult Education, or to Fellowship Hours where everyone can drink coffee. Each of these activities are very important, we should never denigrate them, but they are not what creates the church.

Our most important priority is worship, and everything else in the church needs to revolve around the centrality of worship. If worship is our highest value, if worship is the action which creates the community and empowers God's people, if worship is where we meet Jesus Christ in Word and Sacrament, if worship is the alpha and the omega of our life together, then it seems to me that this

conviction needs to be reflected in our scheduling decisions.

I know of a congregation where the most important ministry is the food shelf and the clothes closet. Hundreds of people flock to this congregation during the week, but on Sunday they worship less than 25 people. In effect they have become Lutheran Social Service, a vitally important ministry to that community, but it is not the essence of the congregation. The most important activity is worship.

Also I continue to be amazed at how many churches which have two services during the school year cut back to one service in the summer. Often they put this one service early in the morning, say 9:00 AM. What does it say to the congregation when the church cuts back in the summer? Or when it puts the service so early in the morning that anyone from the ages of 12 to 25 will not be up in time for worship, unless dragged out of bed by parents? It seems to suggest that worship isn't that vital. See you in September.

The idea that worship is our core value is a hard sell in some places. I have a pastor friend who has been most frustrated because he has a majority of church council members who seldom worship. Sometimes nominating committees choose people who are inactive with the vain hope that this election will make them active, a dubious strategy at best. I once pastored a church where the president of the congregation owned a farm several hours away, and was gone virtually every weekend. She never worshipped. I also had a staff member who hardly ever showed up at worship, didn't like our worship styles. (should I say ex-staff member.)

One of the reasons I was attracted to Lutheran Church of Hope is the absolute conviction of pastors, staff and lay leaders that worship is our highest priority. Pastor Mike articulates this vision often, he interprets the centrality of worship to the staff, and his willingness to preach 865 times on a weekend demonstrates his own personal commitment. Hope offers many dynamic and powerful ministries; Alpha, youth and children and family, missions, the list is long and impressive, but the major reason we are here is to worship and praise God, participating in Word and Sacraments.

Hope is demonstrating this focus on worship by constructing a new chapel which will be completed by November. In many congregations this space would have quickly been allocated to something else: it could have been a lounge with fireplace, or a library, or more office space, or a larger narthex or even storage space (all very

important.) But it is a chapel, designed primarily for worship. Already announced is the next major building program, again to provide expanded worship space, so that more people can participate in Word and Sacrament.

This November this congregation will embark on one of the most ambitious and visionary emphases on worship that has been seen in any Lutheran congregation. Beginning on November 7th, we will offer nine worship services each week. Count them, nine services! What a crazy idea? Why would anyone do such a thing? Why not just put Pastor Mike on video and let technology do the rest?

We do this because worship is the most important thing we do, because we want to provide maximum opportunity for people to worship. We also do this because of the old church growth adage, "when you are 80% full, you are full," which means a growing church has two choices, increase the size of the worship space or add worship services. In the case of Hope, of course, both are necessary.

What are these service times?

Saturday: 4:30 and 6:00 PM
Come as You Are, Worship Center

Sunday: 8:15, 9:30, 11:00 AM
Celebration Services, Worship Center

Sunday: 9:00 and 10:30 AM
Traditional Worship, Chapel

Sunday: 5:00 PM
Contemporary Worship, Chapel

Thursday: 8:30 PM
Immersion, Post Modern, Worship Center

Worship is our top priority. Make sure that worship is at the center of your life as well. Everything else we do flows out of worship. Worship is God's gift of Word and Sacrament.