

I do not want to embarrass anyone, so don't answer out loud, but, "Why do you come to Sunday worship?" Think about it; "Why do I come to Sunday worship?"

And a somewhat related question: "What is the difference between when the Jewish Sabbath worship is celebrated, and when the Christian Sabbath worship is held?" "Why?"

To that first question, I reflect back to before I became a pastor, the time I like to say when I was a real person. In my younger years, it was probably as much a matter of habit and of thinking it bought my way into heaven as anything. Through most of my business career and the few years after before I entered seminary, it was a way of expressing thanks and respect to — "fearing" in the King James English concept, which does not mean "being afraid of" — God, showing that I knew from whence my blessings came, and that it was important to me to set aside that one hour or so per week before God to symbolize my consciousness and respect.

To thank and impress God, but also several times a year I would go to Rockefeller Chapel at the University of Chicago or to Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago to hear not an uplifting sermon, but a thought provoking one, perhaps accompanied by some fine church music. Not exactly a diversion, not simply entertainment, yet not for any purpose other than those I mentioned.

And I am not at all ashamed of that attitude, but it lacked something. I always regarded myself as *independent* from the others with whom I worshipped. Not *indifferent*, but *independent*; my role in God's plan was to act on my own, and while I had regard and affection for my fellow congregants, I was basically a mid-western version of the lone-wolf cowboy out on his own once worship ended.

And what changed me as much as anything was the second time I read the little book that has stimulated my ideas — though these sermons most certainly are not a report on nor a real reflection of that book, just where I felt led — the little book that has stimulated my ideas for these Lenten talks. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the martyred theologian and pastor, and he would prefer the title of "pastor" to "theologian," wrote *Life Together* to reflect upon and to influence life shared in their underground seminary by his students and fellow faculty under the shadow of the Nazi takeover of Germany and of its main Lutheran denomination. They lived together in closer proximity than do we, sharing daily worship both mornings and evenings, and sharing meals. Their *life together* was not like our *life together*, yet he drives me to reflect on the parallels between their life under the shadow of evil — *evil*, for that is what it was — life under the shadow of evil and if not a society, at least a governing party, that was *hostile* to them.

And my point is not that we live under such a shadow, but that we undeniably live in an environment that is increasingly hostile to religion in general, an environment perhaps ignorant, yet nonetheless largely condemning, of Islam. indifferent toward Judaism and Hinduism, but belittling of Christianity and Christians. In such an environment, the *real* question I hope I can address as we continue is *how*, not as lone-wolf cowboys, but together, as a community in Christ, *how* we might live amidst this hostility toward

Christianity and be able to stand up in the face of what is, in fact, evil in the world, and, if not overt hostility, intolerance toward our faith, while we help to make the world a better place.

And, to be blunt, I am momentarily side-stepping part of that question by focusing on what Bonhoeffer's book says to me, because I believe part of the answer is . . . well, wait; I'll interject that.

And I'll interject that in a moment because Bonhoeffer's second chapter is entitled, "Life with others," "others" being one another in the seminary, which basically deals with the morning — the daily morning — "worship" of his seminary community, which I believe helps us to give a new answer to the question with which I opened my comments.

Last week, for those of you who were not here, and in the not unlikely event I was not clear, also for those of you who were here, let me recap. I discussed the difference between a *fraternal* fellowship or community (my term, not Bonhoeffer's, and I used the Greek word for brotherly love, *phillios*) and an *agape*, the Greek term for the selfless love of Christ, an *agape*, or *Christian*, fellowship or community. The difference, and a community could be both, was that the one is based on enjoying, receiving pleasure from, one another's company, sharing earthly diversions and bonds, while the other is based on sharing Christ, and, even if *not* enjoying the other's company, recognizing that Christ is in the other, and accepting the other's faults as, like one's own, forgiven in Christ.

And it is that kind of community we as a congregation should aspire to be — even as we aspire to have strong fellowship that includes a healthy dose of fraternal, brotherly and neighborly, pleasure and love, *phillios*, which I hope we experience in our fellowship following worship, and before leaving the building.

. . . before leaving the building. But what happens after we leave? And the answer to that question leads me back to the question — *questions* — I posed at the outset: "Why do I come to Sunday worship?" and the "Why" about the "when" of weekly Christian worship.

Let me begin with the latter. The Jewish Sabbath, which is Judaism's seventh or last, end day of the week, begins at sundown on Friday, and in the evening worship is observed. Sunday for Christians is the day of sabbath, but it is the *first* day, the *beginning* of the week, chosen as such by the day Christ rose from the dead, rose from the dead and sparked a new beginning.

And so Sunday morning worship is the way we *begin* the week, not end it. Allow me to point out the parallel between beginning the day for Bonhoeffer's seminary family, and beginning the week for us, and then lets take a look at the ways in which *elements of Bonhoeffer's worship* function in our own.

The first element of worship for Bonhoeffer is a reading from the *Psalter*, to simplify, reading a psalm from the book of Psalms. To Bonhoeffer, while the Bible is the "word of God," psalms are prayers "in God's words to us offered back to God" and, indeed for Bonhoeffer, the prayers of Jesus himself. So *ideally*,

when we join together as we do in our Call to Worship most Sundays, we are praying to God as God would have us do. And as Jesus did. We are in reality *speaking God's words to ourselves* as we pray so that we cannot merely *pretend* to holiness.

And we read — pray — that psalm together also as a means of , as practicing, *spiritual fellowship, Christians fellowship or community.*

For those who remember — and it was six years ago, — in a series of sermons I gave on prayer, I emphasized and should emphasize again that God does not need our prayers; we do. I also emphasized then and other times, that when we pray, we need not be in such a hurry to unload our own thoughts that we fail to allow moments — seconds, really— of silence, of mental inactivity, because that is when we can sense God speaking to us, not speaking so much in words of a psalm, but in what praying forces us or perhaps “enables us” would be as good a choice, forces us or enables us to consider when we allow such “silence.” In those seconds, I believe we experience as a fruit of our praying a sense of honesty about our own motives and fears and desires, our shortcomings in word and action and integrity, an honesty that we might otherwise evade.

Which brings me to another of Bonhoeffer's elements, though not in his order: what I offer as the “Pastoral prayer and the prayers of the people,” one person's offering a prayer on behalf of the people, a prayer that includes both their — my, your — specific joys and concerns as well as our more general joys and concerns. But that prayer is not to be my prayer on your behalf, my prayer as your “leader,” but my prayer as a brother praying among brothers and sisters in Christ who are praying together through my words and voice.

That element, that prayer, I mention out of the order in which we practice it and Bonhoeffer mentions it, for the second element he mentions is “reading the Scriptures,” though he recommends doing so in a way which would really upset those who think we read too much Scripture in worship, to which I always asked, “I suppose you are reading regularly at home?” Bonhoeffer would read at least a chapter in each morning's worship, and work through the entire Bible sequentially; I guarantee I would lose you in Exodus 21 were we to try that. But I mention this because in our worship the function of my sermons — most of the year, this Lent is an exception — is to try to put meaning and explanation and application into what the Scriptures, or at least one of the Scriptures, we have read might say to us. We read and I expound upon the Scriptures because — to return to a comment I made earlier about *how “we might live amidst this hostility toward Christianity and be able to stand up in the face of what is, in fact, evil in the world, and, if not overt hostility, intolerance to our faith,”* — because that *how* turns in no small measure about constantly striving to understand better what constitutes our faith, and the nature of the real hostility which it faces. Sorry, but as much as some might disapprove of *same sex marriage*, its acceptance, legally and socially, is not *hostility* toward our faith since members of our faith are ourselves divided on whether it is problematic, but a New York Daily News headline, “We Don't Want Your Prayers,” *that is hostility* toward

our faith. It is a belittling not only of our faith, but it attempts to tell us that “loving our neighbor” means we must favor particular forms of gun control.

I believe we Christians too often have too little real understanding of Scripture and of what Scripture does say to us, even as we profess ourselves believers in the Bible we too readily wield as a weapon against others of God’s children. So constantly striving better to understand Scripture and its interpretation are central to being people of faith in this hostile world, which is why, I believe, Bonhoeffer sandwiches Scripture between our two forms of prayer, the psalm and the prayers I offer.

But all of these elements work together for a purpose, I hope. While I often say that if a sermon I deliver touches one person, it has been successful, the purpose of the *worship service* is to prepare *all* of us, both individually *and collectively*, to go out into the world, however hostile it might be, guiding us in our individual lives, but also letting us know that we are not alone, that in the face of hostility we go connected with one another through our sharing of Jesus Christ and his presence as the Holy Spirit inside of us. We seek through worship to go out as a community that cannot be broken by all the hostility or intolerance we might encounter, by all the evil we must seek to conquer. These elements of worship taken together provide us — even when we do not partake of the Lord’s Supper — the *spiritual* food that helps provide the *spiritual* energy to utilize the Holy Spirit that goes with us as we not so much *end* our worship, but as we *begin* our week,.

And while the inclusion of a hymn is part of Bonhoeffer’s elements, I am going to hold — for reason I shall explain — until after our prayers and offering, a hymn that we normally use to open worship as we go forth to greet the world. Going forth from worship should be like running out onto a football field as a *team* for the opening kickoff, not heading for the locker room as individual members of the team after the game is over.

Until that hymn, then, may our prayers and our participation in reading these Scriptures and the meditation of our hearts in response to the Scriptures we read and to my words prepare us for the week ahead. Amen.