

**“What In God's Name Are We Doing Here?”**  
**Sermon by Rev. Tom Warren**  
**Peace United Church of Christ**  
**August 23, 2015**

In the summer of 1996, upon graduation from seminary, I found myself in a situation that had never crossed my mind as a possibility. While serving my first church in New Orleans, we had attracted a young, “20-something” couple to worship. They had come three or four times when I had a chance to talk with them and invite them to join our fellowship. When I met with them, we had a great conversation, and toward the end of our time together, I asked them “Do you have any other questions?”. The woman spoke up. She said “Yeah, I was just curious. What’s that prayer we do every week that everyone seems to have memorized?” I thought for a moment. “You mean the Lord’s Prayer?” She said “Yeah, I guess. It’s the one that starts out ‘Our Father’...”.

Now, people like me, and perhaps like you, who have been in the church all of their lives, tend to take much of what we do here for granted. We know what the Lord’s Prayer is. We know what baptism is. We know what worship is all about, and if we don’t exactly know what worship is all about, we still engage in the rituals of worship without thinking about it too much, so when our liturgist for the morning forgets to ask us to stand, we stand anyhow. These are our rituals, our traditions. They are just what we do; but the fact of the matter is that we no longer live in a culture that is born into our rituals. Christian Protestant worship is a foreign enterprise to the nonchurched which is an increasing number of our population. For many of us who have been in the church our whole lives, or for those of us who have come back recently, we have kind of forgotten, or never really understood in the first place, why we do what we do in the course of our worship services, so the question for this morning that I will at least begin to try to answer is: “What in God’s name are we doing here?”.

The three scripture readings this morning from the Old Testament, the Hebrew scriptures, are really about the centrality of the Temple for the Israelites. The Temple, of course, was in Jerusalem and the Temple was not just a place to go to worship, but the ancient Israelites believed that God resided in that Temple. God was there, and this is where they had to go almost as a pilgrimage to be in the presence of God. We probably should not be that over the top in our claims that God resides here but, nonetheless, we come first and foremost on Sunday mornings to this place that we call the sanctuary. Of course, this sanctuary that we are in right now is a sacred place to us.

A sanctuary is any place of safety like sanctuary cities. You may have heard in the news that it is a place of safety for certain people, but “sanctuary” is derived from the Latin word “sactuarium” with “-arium” meaning “container”, so “sanctuary” literally means “a container of the Holy”. In the Israelites’ Temple in Jerusalem, way, way down in the center of that Temple, was what they called “the Holy of the Holies”, and that is where God resided, and that “Holy of the Holies” area was only allowed for certain priests in the hierarchy of Israel to go in there. It was not an open place for all people, but it was the place where God was contained, so our sanctuary is a container of the Holy. That’s why we come here because we believe there is something special, something powerful that can happen in this sanctuary.

Now, regarding our worship service, most of us knows what we are doing here or at least has a vague sense of what we are doing here, but I want to walk through this so that we think about how important what we are doing here is, because worship is critical to formation as people of faith.

We begin, of course, with music which we call the “Prelude”. The prelude music is designed not for our entertainment. It is designed as a way to center us, to prepare us, and to help us focus on God. Elizabeth, who typically provides this prelude music, has worked hard to pick our music that will help us to prepare our souls for worship.

Typically, a second thing that we do in worship is that we have the lighting of the candles. We have children do that which is an important way to include children in our worship. Why do we light these candles? We do not need the light. We have plenty of electric lights keeping us in the light. It is a scriptural faith activity. John 8:12 says "I am the light of the world". The lighting of the candles is bringing in, symbolically, the light of Christ into our sanctuary, having the light of Christ present in our worship. We light two candles—one symbolic for the humanity of Jesus and the other symbolic for the divinity of Jesus--so those candles are critically important for setting us up to get prepared for worship.

In our worship, we then go to Announcements which is really just the business of the church.

We then go into a Centering Silence which, again, is an attempt to prepare us for worship after the announcements, then the formality of the worship begins with the Call to Worship.

The Call to Worship is a call to the people by God, through the worship leader, so today Dale Starr was our human vessel, calling us to worship from God, so there is this idea that God is the One calling us to worship. It is an act which brings the worshipping community together and we, in that act of calling to worship, move from our individual selves to this community of faith, so we're coming out from the world, into the sanctuary, being called by God to join the community of faith. We are no longer just individual vessels. We are now part of the body of Christ. It is, of course, another opportunity to focus our minds, to focus our souls, and to focus our inner beings for worship.

Regarding the Opening Hymn, I was saying this morning in our Out of the Box Class that hymns are critically important because most of us develops our understanding of God at least partially in conversation with our hymns. We sing these hymns which is a powerful way that we express our faith, the way that we engage God. One of the things I have noticed from working in nursing homes a lot was that, when I was in Tennessee at a Tuesday night service in a nursing home, many of the people who would come to that service were in the final, very deep stages of Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia, so they, in essence, had no idea where they were or even who they were or who I was, but when they kicked into "Amazing Grace", they were there, so hymns, and what we sing, are critically important to our faith. Hymns, of course, are songs of praise. They are ways of addressing and celebrating God. They provide us with a deeper understanding of God and our faith, and this opening hymn is the song in which we are brought together to celebrate the reason for being together. We celebrate our reason for being together. It's not just that we like each other, but we are here to worship God, so we celebrate through singing.

We then go into the Prayer of Invocation and Confession. This Prayer of Invocation is to call upon God. We do not assume that God is here, but in our prayer we call upon God for God's spirit to be in our midst. To "invoke" is to call God into our midst, so that's what we are trying to do in our Prayer of Invocation. We call upon God to be in our midst as we worship.

We tie into that our Confession. There is a long history of confession, but in the Catholic tradition confession is largely understood as a private encounter with the priest. They do confession in their worship, too, but primarily, in history, confession has been with the priest, but as Protestants, we make confession a public act. We confess to God in front of one another. Confession is not simply about confessing our sins or what we have done wrong because it is public, and it is communal, and there is the individual part of sin that we confess silently in our prayers, but confessing our sins is really about never forgetting our own brokenness. It is about humility. We confess our sins so that we can remain humble people in need of God's grace, so confession is about not forgetting our brokenness, and it is about cleaning the slate and receiving God's grace, so we go on to this assurance of grace. I John's letter says if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Assurance of grace is about renewal, healing and God's action toward us, that we are recipients of God's mercy and forgiveness and grace, so confession and receiving that grace is about getting honest with ourselves, getting honest with God, and receiving God's mercy.

What is exciting about Peace Church is that I have never seen the Passing of the Peace placed in this part of the service. The Passing of the Peace, as I interpret it at this point in the service, is about rejoicing in God's grace. We have all been healed. We have all been recipients of God's grace, and now we're just going to show some love to everyone, and if we don't sing a song after the Passing of the Peace, you all just keep passing the peace forever and ever, but there is a historic piece for the Passing of the Peace. It is not just about rejoicing in the peace that we have received.

In the Roman world, in that first century, the lower classes, the peasants, would kiss the hand or the feet or the hem of the upper classes in public, so they would sort of kiss the royalty of that first century culture. In the early church, they used to do a practice called the Holy Kiss. We are a little anxious because of my lip fungus. We don't want to spread that around. Holy kisses in that first century were sort of how they shared the passing of this peace. It was a way of celebrating our new life in Christ and showing absolute equality. In the church of Jesus Christ in that first century, kisses were not just from the peasants to the royalty. Kisses were shared equally among all people, so when we are passing the peace of Christ, we are affirming that the body of Christ is equal before God and before one another, so it is an important ritual and kind of fun. It is a great way to touch one another in the mornings.

Regarding Scripture and Sermon, I don't have too much to say here. We know that Scripture is our Word. The Hebrew Bible and the New Testament scriptures are what we turn to for faith, but in the Protestant tradition, you may or may not know (but I think you probably know) that we are Protestants because we are protestors. Our origin is protesting against the authority and the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. The 15th century Protestant Reformation was about Martin Luther and a whole bunch of other reformers protesting against the practices of the Roman Catholic Church and the power of the hierarchy and saying that we would be based on what was called "solo scriptura" or "word alone". Our faith as Protestants and the authority for our faith and for the way we organize our church as Protestants would be based on God's Word.

In practice, what we as Protestants do in 2015 is called "prima scriptura" which means we believe that scripture should also be illuminated by tradition, by reason, by experience, and by historical and critical analysis, so we have evolved in some sense to not simply "solo scriptura", absolute word of God, but recognizing that over time we have traditions and rituals and all kinds of experiences and knowledge that allows us to better understand God's Word and God's will.

Martin Luther, who is probably the best known Protestant reformer, said this: "A simple layman armed with scripture is greater than the mightiest Pope without it", so those historic tensions between Catholics and Protestants, which are now hopefully working themselves out, can be seen in Luther's scripture right here about word, power and where it lies.

The Choral Anthem, which we are blessed with each Sunday, is an offering to God. It is not a performance. I think Elizabeth would affirm that statement. It is an offering that the choir gives to God that is often an offering of praise and thanksgiving to God, and it is one of my most favorite parts of worship, so it is, first and foremost, an offering and a gift to God.

The Sermon, of course, is the discourse, or talk, that addresses biblical, theological and moral issues. Sermons have become, over time, largely about moral instruction. Some of that is changing, but that is what they have been. Scripture and sermon are the centerpiece of Protestant worship. You may or may not know this, but while our pulpit is a little bit over on this side, in many Protestant churches the pulpit is right in the center of the sanctuary, symbolically to represent the centrality of the Word. You will see in many Protestant churches a central pulpit symbolic of the centrality of God's Word.

Catholic worship is called what? Mass. "Mass" means "meal", so Catholic worship has a different focus. The primary focus is not necessarily on God's Word, but on the communion meal that they celebrate, so there is a difference there.

After word and scripture, we have a hymn again, and we have the Offertory. The hymn, again, is a response to God's word, often a response of joy and thanksgiving. It is an act of worship, of course. In our Offertory in the Protestant tradition, we give money as an act of worship. One of the quiet anxieties I have about electronic giving (which I am participating in and I think is a good practice in many ways) is that we have nothing to do as an act of worship in the giving moment. If we have given through our computers, when the plate comes around, hopefully we dig around and just put more money in there, but many of the electronic programs of giving will provide a church with cards to put into the pews so that once the plate comes by and you have already given online, you can put that card in as a symbolic gesture so that no one is looking at you and saying "Tom doesn't give anything to the church". Offertory is a very important part of our response to the Word. We give of our lives. Of course, in our culture, finances and money are such a central part of our culture, and what we say with our offering is "I am going to give of my whole life, of my whole being, including my finances", so it is a very important part of our worship and dedication to God.

The Congregational Prayer and Lord's Prayer heading toward the end of the service is, of course, as we do it here, a sharing of concerns. It is placing our joys and concerns in the middle of the community and I think, or at least I hope that, symbolically, when I come down to receive your prayers it is a symbol of the centrality of putting our joys and concerns into the middle of our community and that we are going to pray together about these joys and these concerns. The Congregational Prayer is a time for us to turn the things that are on our hearts, joys or concerns, over to God, so we place those prayers in the center of the community and we turn them over to God through our prayer.

Next, of course, with the Lord's Prayer which comes out of Matthew and Luke. This is the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples. It is central to the Christian faith. It is the prayer that binds Christians of all stripes together. I was intrigued by that idea that the Lord's Prayer binds Christians of all stripes together, so I looked up an interesting fact. In 2007, on Easter morning, it is estimated that 2 billion Christians around the world shared the Lord's Prayer—whether they were liberal, conservative, Evangelical, Protestant, progressive, Orthodox, Greek, or whatever. We share that Lord's Prayer as a binding prayer among all Christians around the world, so it is a powerful, powerful prayer.

We end, of course, with a Closing Hymn and a Benediction. The Closing Hymn is a sending out in song. It is a call, typically, to service and to faith. The pronouncement of blessing comes through the Benediction. Our liturgist will be sharing God's Word, a vessel of God's Word of placing God's blessing upon us, sending us out into the world to serve, and then perhaps, symbolically the most important part of the service is when our acolyte comes in, takes the light of Christ and symbolically marches the light out. It is the symbol that we are to take the light of Christ and go out into the world with it—that the light burns in us and we are to take it out into the world.

The Postlude is our musical sending out to continue to go forward into the world, and all of this that we do each Sunday is called, of course, our liturgy. "Liturgy" in Greek means "work of the people". What we do here is the work of the people. The work of the faith community is what we call our liturgy. It is a communal response to the sacred through the activities of praise, thanksgiving, prayer and repentance.

Last, but not least, and what I think is most important, is that when we come in here to worship once a week, what we are doing is we are being socialized theologically, spiritually, ethically by the narrative that we call the Gospel. It is a different narrative from the world, so coming to worship is critically important in terms of building up our allegiance to Jesus through the Gospel, building up our sense of self and our sense of the Christian faith. We are socialized here in our worship service so that we can go forth out into the world and stand strong in our faith, and it is critically important for us to do that, week in and week out.

Those words are actually just a surface touching of what goes on in worship because the bottom line is that what goes on in worship for each of you is always slightly different. God moves in mysterious ways, and God is powerful. It is always good to be in God's presence here in this sanctuary. Amen.