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Benediction – 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

A lot of threads come together today: we're going to talk some about why our worship is the way it is, and we're going to look at a way that God is working in your life in and through worship of which you might not be aware.

Something should have sounded familiar about two-thirds through this passage; you hear it every Sunday I preach. In fact, I've used these words to close worship for over thirty years. Every now and then, someone stumbles across them, and tells me about it – that's a great connection. Making that connection has to do with two of the four parts of the framework of the Christian life that we teach new members: Glorify, Grow, Give and Go.

Glorify has to do with public worship, and the parts that make up public worship are called liturgy. That's a good church word, but it comes from a Greek word that means "the work of the people" or "civic duty." Interesting, isn't it, that public worship is not just something we do together for ourselves, but work we do for the world? Ever considered that as you've sung a hymn or prayed a prayer of confession? After all, we do call this a *service*, a task, a piece of work! Often we

think we come to church for ourselves, but that's only a part: we come to glorify God, and to serve the world, as followers of Christ.

Grow is about, well, growing. Feeding your mind and spirit with Scripture and spiritual reading, prayer, and service in Christ's name. So, if you're reading Scripture and participating in worship, then some connections should be made: much of what we say in worship comes straight from the Bible. We say the same things over and over.

Not too long ago a friend of mine, who happens to be Jewish, asked why there's so much repetition in worship. In his case, it's especially easy to point to the Hebrew Scriptures and traditions which say repeatedly that "You shall tell or teach your children these things," and rituals like Passover that have question and answer sections.

But why keep doing that? Especially after those words are so committed to memory that they roll off the tongue without thought?

In worship, we follow a form and do and say certain things because they give an order and flow to what we do. As Presbyterians, a form of Christianity which relies on orderliness, there are three basic parts to a service of worship: gathering, presenting ourselves to God; hearing God's word; and responding, being sent by and to serve God. Here, the first part is from the prelude to the pastoral prayer (or the anthem on Communion Sundays); the second, the children's message, Scripture lesson, and sermon; the third, the offering and remainder of the

service. So, we come to God, confessing our unworthiness and celebrating God's mercy and love; hear what the Word has to say to us; and then respond in song, offering, and prayer. And we always are sent with the blessing of God, the benediction.

“Benediction” comes from Latin and Old English, meaning “well-said” or “good word,” and came to mean “a blessing.”

Now, I was brought up in a tradition which taught that a benediction ought always be from Scripture, and every pastor I ever had used the same blessing every week. Some used words we also read today: “Encourage the faint-hearted, support the weak, be patient with everyone...Return no one evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all...” Those may be familiar to some of you, too.

Paul's words in verses 23 and 24 spoke to me – still speak to me – when the time came for me to finally offer my first benediction to a congregation at worship; became a sort of foundation for my ministry: words of comfort and power.

After some discussion, in the end, what my Jewish friend decided was the best answer for him about why we say the same things over and over was comfort. That the same old words, the same ritual, gave a sense of comfort simply in repetition. Another reason why the form of our service doesn't have huge, sudden, overwhelming changes: God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow, and at least a general sense of

stability gives reassurance: so, much remains constant from week to week.

Back to the text: what Paul wrote was a letter to a congregation he knew, to make sure they heard all he had to say – even commanding it be read to everyone. And what does say to these friends? Throughout, he tells them that they are chosen, that they are witnesses for God – in fact, that they themselves are living testaments to God in Christ, and urges them “to live lives worthy of the God who is calling you into his own kingdom and glory.” (1:10) His closing words tell them how to live this life, words as true for any who wish to live a life worthy of God, a Christ-filled life, as they were when Paul wrote them. They are words to us, meant to change lives for Christ. That is, primarily, our task as the church.

Our mission statement, “To know Christ and make Him known in word and deed” says this, because to know Christ is to have a changed life. And lives are changing among us right now, right around you. That’s part of what my letter to you in this month’s Valley Voice is about, and some of you have already taken me up on my request to hear from you about how your personal faith and public life line up. What did change, or *has* changed in your life, and what does God or your faith have to do with it? That’s worth pondering.

But there is one thing about blessing that some people find difficult: what sound like conditional words: “*May* the God of peace... *may* your spirit, soul and body be kept sound and blameless...” “May,” sounds, to us, like “if it’s supposed to be” or even “maybe not.”

If you hear nothing else this morning, please hear this: *these are not conditional statements*. We’ve kept the “may” down through the centuries in English translations of the Bible, tradition, but the English word’s meaning has shifted. Originally, “may” had the force of *certainty*. In other words, God will make you holy, and keep you safe and sound at Christ’s coming.

So, one final reason we say the same words over and over is because they *mean something*, even if we aren’t thinking about their meaning when we say or hear them. They are performative language; what the words say comes into being when they are spoken, like “I pronounce you husband and wife” or “You’re under arrest:” they are declarations which make something come into being. These words of blessing are not my words: they are God’s Word, they apply to us all, they only come from a preacher’s mouth. “Don’t put out the Spirit’s fire,” the bulletin says: let these familiar words grow in your heart, let their meaning fill you, so you will grow in Christ’s service. That is what makes these words a benediction, a good word, a blessing of God for us all: God will keep us safe in Christ.

