

How about today? You come to worship and a birthday party breaks out! But that's what it's all about, this is Pentecost - the birthday of the church!

Anywhere the people of God gather for worship, something should happen – some way, at some time in this time and in this place, our prayer is that something happens – life-giving in the way God knows you need: through a song, a piece of music, a prayer, through the sermon or scripture, in a moment of silence, or even through the person next to you –

Maybe I need to ask - do you come to worship expecting something to happen?

Our scripture lessons this morning from Acts and Revelation are both pictures of worship –

John is having a vision of the great worship in heaven – I hear people describe heaven with pictures wonderful gardens or beautiful golf courses or hiking trails or beaches - really just more of whatever it is they like on earth.

But the picture of heaven that we see throughout the book of Revelation is worship – where the reality of God is more than we can imagine.

And that's what the gathering in the Upper Room is all about – gathered together because of the reality of God in the person of Jesus Christ, more than they could have imagined.

And for you and me today: The reality of God with real people - real world - real things – just look at this table.

Ron Byars, retired professor of worship at Union Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, explains that “From early on, the church made use of...ordinary physical things... They used bread, wine, and oil without apology or embarrassment...”

“A material thing,” he says, “whether it be water, bread, wine, the printed words of Scripture or the vibration of a human voice on the ear – becomes sacramental when Christ uses it to open us to his presence.”

I'm always amused by the arguments over which material things are appropriate in worship – just about everything we do in worship, from the bread used to the songs sung to the music played to even having children in worship has been forbidden at one time or another by one group or another.

We've sometimes made the thing more important than the God we worship – I remember in elementary school, I had three pair of shoes: black Converse All-stars sneakers (I think they're called Chuck Taylors now), a pair of cordovan penny loafers, and a pair of Sunday shoes, that's what they were called – they were black lace ups.

I understand how Sunday is special, but I guess I never really understood the sacramental nature of those shoes! shoes had to do with that, I never really understood.

But what I do understand is that it's not the kind of shoes I wear, but the feet that go in them and how they walk with Jesus every day.

It's these feet that walked into a sanctuary and these feet that are connected to the heart that feels the love of God here, and these feet that are connected to our hands that pass the offering plates and Communion plates and become the helping hands to those in need, and those feet that are connected to that mind that I pray is becoming more and more like the mind of Christ – so that wherever you walk, you know you're walking with Jesus and Jesus is walking with you, wherever we are; and we'll never be the same again.

Something happens when we worship.

Just like those people who walked into a room some two thousand plus years ago – on feet that had followed Jesus along the dusty roads and through the towns and in the midst of all the crowds, and who stood at a distance on a horrible Friday, and now gathered in an upper room to worship –

Because for them, for you and me - worship is a precious time to gather with brothers and sisters in Christ to prepare our own hearts to hear God's Word clearly; to ask God to speak to us that we might be changed.

Like those people gathered in that upper room on that Pentecost Sunday - Worship is the time and the place where you pray that you will not be distracted by your own preferences: By the style of music; the length of the sermon; the place where you sit; or anything that would cause you to focus on yourself instead of God.

These words from our Presbyterian Book of Order say it so well:

*In worship the faithful offer themselves to God and are equipped for God's service in the world.*

Let me say it again:

*In worship the faithful offer themselves to God and are equipped for God's service in the world.*

If you think for one moment that worship is just what you do on occasion for one hour on Sunday morning – look again at that upper room in our story from Acts and John's vision of heaven – worship is what happens to you that makes a difference the rest of your week, the rest of your life, into all eternity.

We celebrate Easter, but we need to act like Pentecost!

Ann Weems tells the parable:

There was once a church that had only party rooms: the Session's Party Room, the Music Party Room, the Feasting Party Room, the Do Justice Party Room, the Love Mercy Party Room, the Touch Lepers Party Room. In the center of the building was a large round room with an altar and a cross: God's Party Room.

There was in the church an air of festivity and brightness that could not be denied. The people outside the church pointed their fingers and shook their heads: "Something should be done about that church."

They were especially upset when they saw that the members wore party hats and smiles both inside and outside the church.

Other congregations came to take a look and were shocked when they saw this church having so much fun during a worship service, snapping their fingers and dancing.

"Sacriligious," screamed the crowd. But the people in the church just smiled at them and went right on doing things like taking people in wheelchairs to the park and playing ball with them.

When everybody else was collecting canned goods for the poor, this church bought pizza and marched right into dingy, dirty, paint-peeling apartments and sat down to eat with the tenants.

They held picnics for the old folks home, and old men ran races while the congregation stamped their feet in applause. It was at one of those picnics that some of the members climbed up on the roof and shouted: "Good news!"

"Now we can get them for disturbing the peace," said one of the outsiders. The police arrived with sirens, ready for the arrest, and came out two hours later wearing party hats and smiles.

One Sunday afternoon, the entire congregation met at the jail and passed out flowers to the prisoners. The following week after bread and wine and much laughter at the Lord's table, the people went to the hospital and asked to see the dying patients. They held their hands and mopped their brows and spoke to them of life.

"Disgraceful!" shouted the crowd. "They must be stopped." So the crowd appealed to the governing body of the denomination, and this committee of respected church people went to see for themselves.

“Do you deny the charges of heresy?” asked the committee. “Do you deny that you’ve mocked the church and the Lord?” The people of the church looked into the stern red faces of the Official Committee and smiled at them.

They held out their hands to the committee and led them to the Birthday Cake Party Room.

There on a table sat a large cake decorated beautifully in doves descending and red flames and words that read: HAPPY BIRTHDAY, CHURCH! The people began cutting cake and blowing up balloons and handing out party hats to the committee members.

“Wait! Wait!” cried the chairperson. “Can’t you take anything seriously?”

“Yes,” said the people. “We take our commitment to the Lord very seriously indeed.”

“You don’t take it seriously at all,” interrupted the chairperson in loud voice and red face. “You have parties and wear silly hats and blow up balloons and sing and dance and have fun. Do you call that commitment?”

The people smiled at the chairperson and asked him if he’d like a glass of wine. The chairperson hit his fist on the table. “I don’t want wine, and I don’t want birthday cake. We’re here to reprimand you. We’re here to show you that you’re wrong. Can’t you be serious?”

“We are,” said the people. “We’re asking you to take communion with us.”

“With birthday cake?” screamed the chairperson. “Outrageous!”

“Outrageous? We ask you to sit at our table and sup with us. God gave the Holy Spirit to believers, and that is something to celebrate! It’s an occasion for a party. We are celebrants of the gift of Life. We are community.

“We are God’s church. We are overjoyed that we can be the church, a community of people, who are many, yet one—who are different, but who walk together and welcome any who would walk with us.

When we weep there is someone to weep with us and to affirm us and to take us to a party. When we see injustices, we must be about God’s business of freeing the oppressed. When we are faithless, we have God’s promise of forgiveness.

Isn’t it remarkable that we can be God’s good news? Is it any wonder we have a church full of party rooms? There is so much love to celebrate!”

The committee stared at the people, and the people moved closer to them and put their arms around them.

The committee chairperson stepped up to the table and sliced a piece of birthday cake, took a bite, and laughed out loud. He began slicing and passing it out.

When the wine was poured and the hands were held, the chairperson raised his glass and said, “There is so much Love to celebrate! Happy Birthday, Church!”

So much love to celebrate!

(Found in Reaching for Rainbows, 1980, by Ann Weems)

I think that’s what was happening in that worship that first Pentecost, and I pray it’s happening today and tomorrow and all the way through eternity!

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.