

Characteristics of Faith Presbyterian Church No. 7

“The Evening Service” Luke 24:28-36

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Luke 24:28-36 (We pick up near the end of the Lord’s encounter with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Remember, the day is Sunday, the first day of the week.)

Remember what we have so far considered as the commitments of this congregation that we wish to preserve in the next generation of our church’s life.

- 1) Reformed Catholicism: that is, intelligent, thoughtful, and unapologetic commitment to the theology and ethics of the Bible, which we understand are best represented in the Reformed tradition, while maintaining and cherishing the unity of the whole church of God, no matter its wide-ranging theological disagreements.
- 2) Our approach to preaching with its concentration on the deep exposition of Holy Scripture and featuring especially the consecutive exposition of books of the Bible.
- 3) The Christian family as an incubator of faith in the rising generation.
- 4) The singing voice of the congregation: that we intend to sing texts that rise to the standard set in the biblical psalter and the best tradition of Christian praise that are set to music, of whatever style, that serves those texts and elevates the congregation’s praise and prayer as the best church music has always done.
- 5) And, last time, the prayer meeting as the center of the church’s ministry of corporate prayer and as the powerhouse of the church.

Tonight we move on to consider *the evening service*, once again an increasingly distinctive feature of our congregational life. (I fully realize that tonight I am preaching to the choir. You all come faithfully to the evening service. Perhaps this sermon should have been preached in the morning!) As was the case with the prayer meeting, twenty-five years ago no one would have thought to say that the evening service was a characteristic of his or her congregation. *Every church had an evening service*. Twenty years ago every church in our Presbytery of the Pacific Northwest had an evening service. Today, if my count is correct, only two of our thirty-four churches and missions, have an evening service and only ours is well-attended. I cannot be sure, and it would take far too much work to confirm, but my guess is that there are not ten evening services in the PCA with an attendance as large as ours and the number may be closer to five, though there are certainly many, many, many more than ten churches with a morning attendance that is larger than ours. By “evening service” I mean, of course, a second service, different from the service held on Sunday morning and with a different sermon, to which the same congregation is expected to return. Some large churches may worship on a Sunday evening but in their case the evening service is simply one of several they offer on the Lord’s Day, each service the same as the others.

It is phenomenal how quickly this institution of Protestant and Reformed Christianity has disappeared. The practice of centuries was overturned in the blink of an eye and so little is it missed that, so far as I can tell, no one is contemplating an effort to restore the evening service to the church’s life and hardly anyone seems even curious to know how it happened that we no

longer have evening services. Most of the young men in our seminaries have grown up without it and have no plans to institute it when they are pastors of churches. How did that happen and, more important, why? Well, as with the prayer meeting, the evening service wasn't dropped because calculations were made and it was discovered that God's people didn't need it, or that it actually did more harm than good, or that there was no support for it in the Bible. I doubt anyone ever made a serious argument that *it was better* not to have a second service on the Lord's Day. Certainly no one ever said publicly that the Lord's people were too often at worship, were singing too much, praying too much, and hearing the Word of God preached too much. The loss of the evening service occurred for several altogether mundane reasons.

- 1) Attendance declined and no one seemed to know how to reverse that trend. In a culture of voluntary association even churches felt obliged to give people what they wanted and people didn't want to go to church twice on Sunday; at least most people didn't.
- 2) Sunday more and more became a day like other days, a day that people, Christian people among them, prized for its freedom from other obligations. Once one attended the morning service, he or she wanted the rest of the day for other things, whether TV football, other forms of recreation, mowing the lawn, family time, or whatever.
- 3) American Christians generally became less disciplined and less habitual in the exercise of devotion. The death of the evening service happened at the same time that the prayer meeting disappeared, family devotions became a thing of the past, even Sunday School became less and less a feature of evangelical life. Are you aware that Sunday School is dying in the PCA and in American evangelical life in general?

To put it simply, that ministers and their churches capitulated to the general disinterest in evening worship was *a triumph of the zeitgeist*, the spirit of the age, pure and simple. Christians are living in an age that prizes ease, comfort, pleasure and personal freedom; an age that is less disciplined and less personally demanding. And the influence of this cultural spirit has been felt profoundly in the church. It is not as if anyone can claim that the second service on the Lord's Day was *replaced* by something equally valuable and better supported by the congregation. Would that on a Sunday evening large numbers of Christians were now gathered for prayer meetings or for evangelistic meetings or to enjoy Christian fellowship. But it is not so. The evening service died for lack of interest in what was done at that service. Here at Faith Presbyterian Church we happen to think that death of far greater consequence than most do in our Presbyterian Church in America. This evening I want to tell you why we think so and, therefore, why we are committed to preserving Sunday evening worship in the next generation here at Faith Presbyterian Church.

First, while we readily admit that the Bible never commands us to worship twice on the Lord's Day, both morning and evening, and while we are never explicitly shown the apostolic church worshipping both in the morning and the evening of the same Lord's Day, that hardly means that there is not a biblical argument to be made for Sabbath evening worship. Indeed, I would say that the biblical data is an obvious reason why evening worship on the Lord's Day, a second service, has been an instinct of the church and so her regular practice throughout her history and so something we ought to consider carefully before we should ever cease this practice. Consider data such as these:

1) Provision was made in the liturgical regulation of the tabernacle and temple for both morning and evening sacrifices and these were explicitly required to be continued on the Sabbath day (Numbers 28:1-10). Remember, the worship of tabernacle and temple was the template for New Testament worship in many ways. And by explicit command there was evening worship in the temple on the Lord's Day.

2) Psalm 92, which is explicitly identified as a psalm "For the Sabbath Day," and is a psalm for public worship, reads, "It is good...to proclaim your love in the morning and your faithfulness at night." It is *good*, that is, to worship the Lord both morning and evening on the Sabbath day. The Bible says so! Or in Psalm 134 we read: "Come, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord, who stand *by night* in the house of the Lord! Lift up your hands to the holy place and bless the Lord." That is, do that at night!

3) In the New Testament we have record of evening worship on the Christian Sabbath, that is Sunday (Acts 20:7) – in fact, interestingly, every single Sunday service of which we have explicit record in the New Testament is an evening service – and we have it in a book, the book of Acts, that very clearly was written to set before us facts representative of the life of early Christianity. True enough, we don't know that the church in Troas had worshipped that same Lord's Day morning and returned for a second service. Perhaps not. But surely it is more than simply an interesting historical detail that what might be called the first Sunday "service" of the new epoch took place on a Sunday night when on the day of the Lord's resurrection the Lord appeared to his disciples gathered in a room in Jerusalem. So much about that first gathering serves as a paradigm for us: the Lord's presence, the gathering of the disciples on Sunday rather than Saturday (and then again the Lord appearing the next Sunday after apparently not appearing to them during the week in between); this is, after all, some of the principal evidence that after the resurrection the Lord Jesus appointed Sunday as the new Sabbath of the Christian church. So can anyone say that it was simply happenstance that the Lord met his disciples on a Sunday *evening*? True enough, the text in John 20 does not explicitly *say* that the Lord's second Sunday meeting with his disciples occurred at night, but it has been thought that the language naturally suggests that it did. [Morris, *John* NICNT, 852] In other words, the first two worship services of the new epoch of Christian worship were Sunday evening services.

4) Just as morning has a special significance in the history of salvation (e.g. our Savior rose from the dead in the morning), so many sacred events have sanctified the evening (e.g. the Savior's birth, the transfiguration, the struggle in Gethsemane, etc.). There is something appropriate in the church worshipping at the time that recollects such sacred and important events and, supremely, the first acts of Christian corporate worship that occurred in the evening of Easter Sunday by the Lord's own intention and arrangement. There is that in the Bible that suggests – if it does not command – Sunday evening worship.

Second, the fact that the church has practiced evening worship throughout her history suggests not only that she thought there were important reasons to do so, but that Christians had no difficulty managing to get back to church a second time on the Lord's Day. While we do not know and so cannot say how widely the practice was followed in early Christianity, limited as the materials that have come down to us are, we do know that at least the larger churches worshipped both morning and evening. [*Encl. of Early Christianity*, 938] In Hippolytus' *Apostolic Tradition*, for example, a liturgical manual from the early third century, the early 200s, we find a liturgy for the evening service. [Gregory Dix and Henry Chadwick (eds), 50-52]

Here at Faith Presbyterian Church we have learned to love singing *Hail! Gladdening Light* as we did this evening, one of the earliest Christian hymns extant, dating from at least the 3rd century and perhaps earlier. It is a hymn for the evening service of the Christian church. It is a hymn, it used to be said, for the lighting of the lamps. We also sang Ambrose's beautiful hymn to the Trinity, another hymn explicitly for evening worship. To be sure there is much we do not know about the worship practices of the first several centuries after Pentecost. But we know that at least many Christians came to church Sunday night.

And throughout the church's history we find evidence of this evening Lord's Day worship. Of course in the Protestant era it became a fixture of evangelical practice. Frequently it was an afternoon service rather than a service at night, to accommodate both the need for daylight in a world in which nighttime illumination was poor and, in more rural areas, as a way to make possible two services in a single trip by horse or wagon. Calvin, for example, had a morning and an afternoon service at St. Peter's in Geneva and many farming communities in America did also well into the 20th century. John Newton had an afternoon second service at Olney and later added a third service in the evening. [Brian Edwards, *Though Many Dangers*, 132-133] For a short time, when we were smaller and could fit everyone easily at table, we did the same thing here from time to time, separating the two services with a meal we ate together.

And so it was that evening worship on the Lord's Day remained a fixture of Protestant practice up to our own time. The Anglicans had their evensong and most other Protestants simply had their evening service, the more evangelical among them making it preeminently a preaching service, though always including congregational singing. I have been reading a new biography of J.C. Ryle, the 19th century champion of evangelical faith in the Church of England. Think of him as the J.I. Packer or John Stott of his day. He entered the ministry almost by accident, having no intention to do so and having no preparation for the work apart from his study of classics in university. By the by I happened to notice that immediately upon entering his first pastorate he was responsible to preach two sermons every Sunday to his new congregation. Two sermons. In other words, his parish had both a morning and an evening service and he was expected to preach in both services. [I. Murray, *J.C. Ryle: Prepared to Stand Alone*, 59] When because of ill-health he moved from one parish to another, once again there were two services on the Lord's Day that the young minister had to prepare. [63]

It was no surprise to us that when we arrived in Scotland in the mid-1970s we found that the church worshipped morning and evening on the Lord's Day. The evening congregation was as large as the morning. When we were in Australia, morning and evening worship once again. In Israel morning and evening worship. In Uganda morning and evening worship. My point here is simply this: the practice of worshipping twice on the Lord's Day is an ancient tradition, deeply and widely fixed in the practice of Christian churches of all kinds. Do we have a good reason, has anyone even suggested a good reason why we should abandon the practice of the Christian ages? What is that reason, if reason there be?

Third, the evening service is and always has been inextricably bound to the sanctification of the Lord's Day. It should surprise no one that the evening service died at the same time the sanctification of the Lord's Day died in evangelical churches. The Sabbath as a day holy to the Lord is increasingly a dead letter in even Bible-believing churches. With blue laws almost

universally removed from the books, Sunday in modern Western culture has become increasingly like any other day. Many work on Sunday; she can shop, he can mow his lawn, one can do everything he or she would do any other day of the week. And the fact that most people do not have to work on Sunday – a holdover from a different time when Sabbath rest was an important feature of public life – makes Sunday a day of opportunity for most Americans, Christians included.

What the evening service did for centuries was to anchor the uniqueness of Lord's Day, to protect its special character as a day to be observed and kept holy, which is to say, to be devoted to a special use. With a service in the morning and a service in the evening, the day was a day whose purpose was fixed by the worship that began it and concluded it. Either wittingly or unwittingly the significance of worshipping morning and evening on the Lord's Day has always been that it served as a merism, two contrasting terms that together referred to the whole. *Morning and evening of the Lord's Day meant, thus, the whole of the Lord's Day.* The evening service has always provided structural support for the sanctification of the Lord's Day. Christians universally find it much easier to keep the Lord's Day holy and make proper use of its time if the hours following the morning worship are an interval between two services. Then there is a limited amount of time in the middle of the day to put to proper use before it is time to return to church. Such a definite structure of the day lends itself to obedience and to a wise use of the day. On the other hand, in those churches where the Christian family is home from church at 11:00 a.m. or 1:00 p.m., with the remainder of the day to its end stretching before them and with no occasion to return to church, the sanctification of the day is provided no support and now depends entirely on the determined exercise of the will. We are finding in American evangelicalism that this is a recipe for disaster so far as the holiness of the Sabbath day is concerned. But, if keeping the Sabbath holy is one of the great engines of Christian faith, holiness and joy, as the Bible teaches that it is, the loss of the sanctification of the Sabbath in the evangelical church is no small thing.

The time between the services, the Sunday meal, the few hours left for fellowship or good works, was far more likely to be distinctly Sunday-time than it is when once the morning service is over nothing else remains to give the day its special sanctity or purpose. In other words, the evening service protected and preserved the unique character of the Christian Sunday. So it should surprise no one that the death of the evening service both caused and resulted from the death of the Sabbath Day as a whole day holy to the Lord.

And believe me, that the Lord's Day is largely dead as a full day set apart is now a fact of evangelical life, as it is fact in many quarters of our PCA. How rarely nowadays does anyone hear it said, "No, not on Sunday. I don't do that on the Lord's Day." Indeed, I hear more and more frequently now PCA ordinands, young men being examined for entrance into the PCA ministry, express their doubt that the church actually *has to* worship on Sunday, suggesting that it is only tradition that makes Sunday the day of worship – they always say it's a perfectly fine tradition and they are happy to continue to preserve it – and that it might just as well be some other day of the week. But, if so, then a full day, one in seven, no longer exists in their minds as a Day of the Lord. For if we worship, for example, on Thursday, it is certain that no one is going to set the entire day apart for unique and special uses. That both the evening service and the Sabbath day are increasingly disappearing in churches today is a fact that more people ought to

ponder. In any case, the death of the Sabbath and the evening service are two sides of the same coin.

Fourth, the evening service wonderfully contributed to the purposes for which the Lord set apart one day in seven. In the evening service the praises of God were sung, the prayers of the people were offered, and the Word of God was read and preached. With the end of the evening service God's people now do much less of those sacred and immensely important things. Like it or not Christian people hear much less preaching than they used to; they sing many fewer hymns than they used to, they pray less often than they used to about fewer things, and they are together as a congregation less often and for less time than they once were. Are we supposed to think this constitutes an advance or an improvement or that we are better off doing these things less than we once did?

I give my own testimony as a preacher that, were it not for the evening service – a well-attended evening service for which I am very grateful – there are many parts of the Bible this congregation would never have had taught to it and many biblical themes that would never have been taught so comprehensively. Had I been limited to a single sermon each week, a long series on the Bible's doctrine of affliction, or biblical ethics, or nearly two years in Samuel would be impossible to justify. We live in an increasingly biblically illiterate age, a condition hardly to be successfully addressed with less preaching rather than more!

Many Christians now are in church for an hour or hour and a half *per week*. That's it: no evening service; no prayer meeting; no Sunday School. Can that be right? Is the corporate life of God's people supposed to be so minor a feature of the Christian life? Can the Christian life be sustained with that little nourishment? Remember, a small group or Bible study is not church; it is not the congregation of the Lord's people; it is not a meeting under the superintendence of the Christian ministry; it is not the worship of God's house, the preaching of God's Word, or the Lord's Supper. Can the Christian life be sustained with so little of all these things? The signs are not encouraging.

Fifth, there was always a special character to the evening service because evening itself has a special character. I think this explains why the evening service was typically never simply a repetition of what had been done in the morning. It had its own character. In my experience, evening services were always different from the morning services of the same church. In Scotland the service was simpler. Mr. Still, our pastor in Aberdeen, preached much longer in the evening than he did in the morning, and that is saying something, because he preached long sermons in the morning! Martyn Lloyd Jones preached, as a rule, more distinctly evangelistic sermons in the evening. The congregation knew that it was to the evening service in particular that they were to bring their friends. The number of the elect who were summoned to faith and life in Christ by preaching in Sunday evening services must be very large. But now there are half as many services in which a man or woman, boy or girl, might hear for the first time the words of life.

Here, in our evening services, we have not only covered much of the Bible, we have heard testimonies of God's grace in the lives of men and women, had missionaries and ministers from all over the world tell us of the kingdom of God in other places, and heard some fascinating

lectures from men who are not Christian ministers. Think of Eric Metaxas' lecture on William Wilberforce or Dr. Rogland's series years ago on creation and evolution. We have heard performed some of the grandest of Christian music. We have had funerals as our evening service and we have had weddings as our evening service, something we would not do in the morning. Max and Lara Rogland are celebrating their 25th anniversary this year and they were married in this sanctuary in a Sunday evening service. At the same time the evening service has always remained a service of Christian worship. Our evening service always includes hymns and prayers, and almost always a sermon; we sometimes have baptisms and frequently the Lord's Supper. We do not repeat the full liturgy a second time. We do not have an offering or a corporate confession of sin or absolution. The evening service here as in most places is a different service and has a different character. But that different character makes it special and immensely valuable.

The English poet, Meredith, has a line, "the largeness of the evening earth." G.K. Chesterton, commenting on that line, wrote, "The sensation that the cosmos has all its windows open is very characteristic of evening..." Christian worship on the Lord's Day evening gains a special character from the hour. The special character of evening hymns bears witness to the particular set of holy thoughts that crowd the soul in the evening hours, not least the likening of the end of the day to the end of one's earthly life. A 1985 survey of the favorite hymns of British churchgoers placed several evening hymns in the top ten (including *The Day Thou Gavest, Lord, is Ended* [No. 1], and *Abide with Me* [No. 7]). It is painful to contemplate generations of Christians growing up and not learning to sing these superb hymns, timeless in their theological truth, their Christian sentiment, and their exquisite beauty, and so beloved of generations of the saints. No one is going to say that we don't need such hymns but no one is going to sing *The Day Thou Gavest Lord, is Ended* in the morning service! Without the evening service, such hymns and the sentiments they so powerfully conveyed to generations of Christians must disappear from the church's mind and heart. The simple fact is that generations of believers have known the special, the unique character of evening worship from hallowed experience. But this generation of believers knows nothing of this. This is a terrible loss!

Add all of this together and answer this question: why, why on earth would we abandon the church's Sabbath evening service? It has been her practice from ancient times, it serves so many holy uses, it is hallowed by so much blessing that God's people have received in it, it serves wonderfully to protect the sanctity of the Lord's Day, and it adds more of what nourishes and sustains a Christian life. Tell me again why we should no longer worship on the Lord's Day evening. Tell me, if you can, why any Christian should not want to be in church morning and evening on the Lord's Day.

We are, after all, talking about only another hour or two out of the entire week. Surely we should have a good reason, a very good reason, a reason we can very easily explain and defend why we would not make a special effort to be in God's house, to sing his praise and hear his Word, twice on the Lord's holy Day as the devout have always done. A day devoted to his worship and to the refreshment of our souls in him, surely is very naturally a day that begins and ends in God's house, among God's people, with his Word in our ears and his praise in our hearts. What better way to end the first day of the week, the Sabbath, than in the house of God!