Characteristics of Faith Presbyterian Church No. 9
"Liturgical Intelligence" Psalm 84:1-12
June 25, 2017
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Text Comment: I have chosen Psalm 84 as a text not because I intend to expound the psalm or even discuss it. I chose it among many psalms I might have chosen because it so beautifully illustrates the spiritual life that God's people have always drawn from the worship of God's house and the importance devout believers have always attached to that worship. It is, as you know, a psalm of pilgrimage to the house of God.

v.6 This is the spring, this is the time when God's people went to Jerusalem for Passover.

v.7 There is in other words strength in the Lord to be gained in this worship (vs. 5-7)

You see how in the Psalm the spirit of and desire for worship are, as it were the other side of the coin; the holy and godly and obedient life on the reverse.

In this series of sermons on features of our congregation's testimony that are less usual and more distinctive and features that we wish to preserve in the next generation of the church's life, we have so far considered our attitude toward theological disagreement in the believing church, our standards for preaching the Word of God, our commitment to the Christian family as an incubator of faith in the rising generations, our understanding of the standards that should govern our singing as a church, our practice of both a weekly prayer meeting and a second Sunday service and, last time, our commitment to the practice of church discipline as that practice is defined and described in the Word of God.

You will appreciate that many of the most important characteristics of our common life we share with either all other evangelical churches or a great many of them and with the churches of our own denomination. Our commitment to the Bible as the Word of God, to the Reformed Faith, to the corporate worship of God, to the ministry of evangelism, to the support of gospel work around the world, our commitment to the Christian life as a life of love for God and man and a life of obedience to the law of God; I say all of these commitments**,** bind us to the common life of the believing church of God and the believing Reformed church. We are glad to say that in all these fundamental ways we share the life of faith with the rest of the body of Christ. More than that, we are happy to belong to a denomination in which such commitments are heartfelt and represent strong suits of our denominational life. We are proud of the Presbyterian Church in America's commitment to the gospel and to the great commission. We have considered in this series only those features of our church life that are *not shared* by other faithful churches; that distinguish us – not individually and uniquely, but to a significant degree – from churches that are in other ways likeminded, even in our own denomination, even in our own presbytery.

In point of fact, therefore, this series of evening sermons was completed last Lord's Day evening. I don't propose to deal tonight with a further characteristic by means of which Faith Presbyterian Church differs from other congregations of like commitment to Christ and the gospel. But I thought that a final sermon would give me the opportunity to address an important aspect of our life together; not as distinctive as the others, but one concerning which there has been significant change through the years – in our church and in many others – and concerning which we may anticipate further changes. It concerns an area of our corporate life and witness that has undergone more profound change over the past generation than any changes in our theological or spiritual convictions, and in many other churches besides our own. Indeed, if there is a characteristic of Faith Presbyterian Church to be found in this respect – and it would hardly be unique to us – it would be our concern to get this right, to continue to perfect our practice, and to continue to study to learn what else ought to be done or how this might be done better than we're doing it at the present. It is not a subject about which we often speak – how often, after all, does one stop to reflect on what one does all the time? – but it is a subject of immense importance and one about which there is a great deal to say. So, I thought, the opportunity to address it was not to be missed. *I am speaking of our worship service.* I don't mean the congregational singing. We've considered that already as an aspect of our corporate worship. I am thinking of the liturgy as a whole and in all its parts and forms, what we do from the time we begin our worship service to the time we end it, from the time we enter the sanctuary on the Lord's Day to the time we leave it.

Now, as I said, our worship service is not distinctive in the sense that it is dissimilar to that of most of the other churches in our presbytery or most of the churches in our Presbyterian Church in America. It is not. The singing may be different in certain ways, but the structure and the content of the worship is in largest part similar to what you would find elsewhere. Fundamental commitments are shared here as they are elsewhere. Our sister churches are committed as we are to worship that is faithful in both form – its content and structure – and freedom – its being heartfelt and sincere in reverence, in gratitude, and in joy. But our sister churches, like ourselves, do not worship as churches of our type used to worship not so long ago.

For example, we have for long years now confessed our sins together as a congregation. A generation ago few English speaking Presbyterian Churches did that in Sunday worship. But nowadays a great many do, so a corporate confession of sin hardly distinguishes us from other like congregations. To be sure, there are still many PCA churches in which, if a prayer for forgiveness is offered in Sunday morning worship, it is offered by the pastor on behalf of the congregation in his long prayer in the middle of the liturgy. But a corporate confession offered by the congregation is increasingly common. I can't say for sure if it is now the majority practice, but I suspect that it is.

In a similar way – and far more surprisingly in a way, historically speaking - we observe the Lord's Supper every Lord's Day. Fifty years ago hardly any Reformed Churches did that. The Lutherans and the Episcopalians did, but not Presbyterians, Baptists, or the general run of evangelical Bible churches. Infrequent communion was still very much the norm. Indeed infrequent communion was a large part of what was meant when churches such as ours described themselves as "non-liturgical." It was evidence of our ignorance that we thought we were non-liturgical; after all, everyone has a liturgy. If you do several things in worship and do them in some order, you have a liturgy. "Non-liturgical" actually meant only that we had an un-analyzed worship service, a service in which not much thought had been invested, and a service we would have been hard-pressed to explain if anyone had asked us to explain it. Infrequent communion was the practice here for many years, but not since 1991, some 26 years ago. We alternate the

Supper between morning and evening services – *that* is unique among the churches of our presbytery and unusual in the PCA, and all the more so as the evening service has disappeared so widely in our denomination – but every-Sunday communion is no longer a characteristic or distinctive of the congregation because we share that practice with a great many other churches. Virtually every church plant in the PCA now is established with this practice. The historic custom of quarterly communion has now virtually disappeared throughout the denomination and every Sunday communion if it is not yet the norm has become increasingly the norm in large segments of the church. I happen to know that in the Tennessee Valley Presbytery just a few years ago there was still but one of some 50 churches that had the Lord's Supper every Sunday, but that number is slowly increasing even there. Certainly there are churches that have not yet gone to the new practice – which, after all is the Church's ancient practice – but they are steadily declining in number.

What is more, a more programmatic liturgy is likewise now commonplace in our churches. By that I mean that the liturgy, the order of events in the service, follows a pattern based on biblical principles. In the churches in which I was raised the worship service was, as it is now, a series of separate actions – the singing of a hymn, the offering of a prayer, the reciting of the creed, and so on – but there was no discernable plan, no guiding or overarching liturgical principle or theory that explained why one thing was done at that point and why the thing that followed it was done next. It was a jumble without any obvious rationale. Why we did one thing and then another, why we put this here and that there, even the minister couldn't have told you. It was simply a traditional order. So little did it represent a liturgical theory, so little was there a theological pattern to the order, so little was the liturgy of the Sunday worship of our churches supposed to represent some reality, that both ministers and people frequently referred to the service as composed of two parts: the preliminaries – that is what they called hymns, the prayers, the creed, and the giving of offerings: the preliminaries – and the sermon. Ours were sermon-centered services. We knew what we were there for and it wasn't the preliminaries!

It wasn't entirely the ministers' fault, though they certainly should have asked more questions than they did. Presbyterian seminaries had always treated worship as a step-child in the curriculum. There was no serious education in Christian worship, its principles, its controversies, its historical development, or its formative thinkers. I didn't even know that there was something to learn about all of those things until I was in my ministry reading books on these subjects and discovered that the bibliography of Christian worship, the liturgical bibliography is fully as large and fully as sophisticated as the theological bibliography is. I knew the theological bibliography. Ask me for some books on the subject of election, I can give them to you by name off the top of my head. Ask me for some good books on the authority of the Bible or some good books on justification by faith, I can name them to you. But if you had asked me, in those days, for five really good books on the Lord's Supper, I might not have been able to name one. And the one I would have named would probably not really qualify as a good book on the Lord's Supper. In seminaries we were taught about Christian theology, but not about Christian worship, even though worship is the only thing Christians do all together – it is the defining act of their common life – even though worship is, in the Bible, the great engine of Christian discipleship, even though the Bible spends an immense amount of its space teaching right worship and correcting false principles and practices of worship, even though worship has been a principal cause of the church's division through the ages, and even though Sunday worship is the church's principle public witness to the world; still we were taught very little about worship. So Presbyterian pastors knew almost nothing about the history or principles of Christian worship. What is more, perhaps predictably, Reformed scholars had written very little on these subjects and a Presbyterian pastor who wanted to know more about what the worship service of a Christian church ought to be, what it ought to include, its order, its forms, and so on, would have had to read books by Roman Catholics and Anglicans and, for that reason those books would have been hard for him to find and harder still to understand.

Had the history of Presbyterian worship been better understood, we might have begun to rethink our practice earlier than we did. Presbyterian worship was in fact formed in a polemical way in its formative period, more in the negative than in the positive As a loyal Presbyterian I find it painful to admit that, but it is true. The Puritans and early Presbyterians pared their services of the things that enemy Christians did – they feared that they would produce the sort attitudes they did not like in the Episcopalians and in the Roman Catholics – even to the point of eliminating perfectly biblical forms and practices. Kneeling, for example, was removed for fear that kneeling at the communion would suggest adoration of the elements themselves – the bread and the wine – so Presbyterians stopped kneeling altogether. A huge mistake. Presbyterians always prided themselves on their Biblicism. We were the Christians who were willing to do what the Bible said come wind come weather. The Bible said to kneel but we didn't. For centuries we didn't. We got so used to it so it never bothered us. In other ways as well the Presbyterian service was shorn of elements that suggested to our fathers mindless and perfunctory performance rather than heartfelt offering of oneself to God. Corporate prayers were removed for such a principle. Catholics made too much of the Supper, so we made less. Some of our fathers knew better, Calvin for example; but over time the Spartan Presbyterian service became the norm. A few things were added back in over time, but rarely for reasons of thoughtful principle, of study, of the reexamination of the history of Presbyterian worship that might have led us to correct other errors in our liturgical life. It remained a pastor-centered, sermon-centered service, only rarely sacramental in form and substance. A few of you grew up in these churches as I did, and you remember those services as I remember them. Virtually the only voice you ever heard was the voice of the minister except when the congregation was singing.

As a consequence, we Presbyterians have long practiced *a theological standard of conformity*. We accepted or rejected ministers exclusively according to their knowledge and their beliefs. In preparation for the Christian ministry a Presbyterian seminarian learned *the Bible and Christian theology*; he learned almost nothing about worship, about liturgy, its history and its principles. At his examination for ordination – this is still largely true today – very often not a single question would be asked about what he knew about worship or how he intended to superintend worship in his congregation, why he thinks worship is important as the Bible seems to suggest it is, and so on. Roman Catholics and Episcopalians, on the other hand, have long practiced *a liturgical standard of conformity*. They cared too little about how much a man knew about the Bible or the theology of the church, but they cared a great deal about how he would conduct worship. That was a great mistake on their part, not caring about the biblical learning of the minister, but it was a mistake on our part not to care about what he knew about worship and how he would superintend it in his own congregation. Worship is, in the Bible, the engine of the Christian life. Bad worship, even inferior worship, has consequences, important practical consequences for God's people.

Over the past generation, as I said, we have lived through the most a profound revolution in Presbyterian worship that has occurred since the days of the Reformation itself or at least the days of the Second Reformation, the 17th century. For the first time in four centuries, English speaking Presbyterians are observing the Lord's Supper as a regular part of their weekly worship. After so long doing differently, that is remarkable. We are now very likely to wonder why our parents and grandparents didn't see how obvious this was, both in the Bible and in church history. Further, we have ordered our worship services according to a liturgical principle in a way Presbyterians didn't for centuries. We structure our worship service either as a way of renewing our covenant, remaking our covenant with the Lord or as a way of recapitulating the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ every time we come together as God's people to worship him in his house.

To be sure, the revolution has carried us here at Faith in some respects a bit further than it has carried others. For example, we kneel for corporate prayer in worship. Still only a few of our PCA churches do that, no matter how obviously it is the teaching of the Bible. Some habits die harder than others. But then some of our churches are doing things in worship that we are not, or do not yet do. In fact, as the liturgical consensus of centuries has broken down in Bible believing Presbyterian churches and new things are being done, every congregation is doing what is right in its own eyes – no presbytery involves itself in these questions, no presbytery is examining the member congregation to see precisely what they're doing in worship and whether they can improve in this way or in that; every congregation is making its own way, especially as they become aware of what other congregations are doing – and it may be a long time before our churches coalesce around a new practice of public worship and most of us are worshipping again in the same way. When I was a boy you could have gone to any of our churches across the country and the worship service would have seemed entirely familiar to you. Now you can go to different PCA churches and think you are in a different denominations so different is one worship service from another. It may be quite some time before we are again as completely together as once we were. That is going to take more experience, more scholarship, more public discussion, and, alas, probably more controversy.

Now, if you know anything about the history of Christian worship – and it is an immense area of study – you will immediately detect the origin of some of the practices that are now commonplace in at last a goodly number of our Presbyterian churches' Sunday worship. You will find similar things in Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, and Lutheran services. That is no accident. Christian worship does not originate in a vacuum.

In the first place, its principles and practices are founded on the teaching of the Bible. We can find everywhere in the Word of God the fundamental liturgical division between Word and sacrament, In every Christian worship service anywhere in the world, the sermon is going to come before the Lord's Supper. Why is that? *Because you find that everywhere in the Bible* for reasons that I think the Bible itself explains. But you also find in the Bible the place and use of hymns, the nature and function of corporate prayers, the presence of offerings in worship, the reading and preaching of the Word of God, even the benediction. What is more you find everywhere an equal emphasis on form – what ought to be done – and freedom – the spirit in which what is done ought to be done. We also find in the Bible an emphasis on the importance of liturgical order; the idea that meaning, profound meaning is often powerfully conveyed by the order of events in worship. It's not a matter of little importance in what order things are done in worship. It changes the religion entirely if hands are laid on the sacrificial animal *before* it is killed rather than *after*. In the former the principle is substitutionary atonement; in the latter it is buying the god's favor with a gift. Whether we are considering the liturgy of covenant renewal in Exodus 24, the liturgy of the burnt offering in Leviticus 1, or the liturgy of encounter with God in Isaiah 6, the order is baked into the meaning of the actions performed. And so in our worship we do not pledge our obedience to God until first we have confessed our sins and received their forgiveness, we don't give offerings to the Lord until we have renewed our relationship with him in forgiveness and absolution, and so on. In other words, reading the Bible has always and is always going to shape public worship in profound and predictable ways, ways that are easily detectable in the history of Christian worship.

In the second place, like it or not, there is a central tradition of Christian worship coming down to us through the ages because that worship experienced an organic development, as did Christian theology. Just as the doctrine of the triune God and the hypostatic union – the two natures of Christ in one person – did not drop entire and complete from heaven, but were worked out over the centuries of the church's life, so the church's worship developed and was perfected – alas also perverted and renewed – through the centuries. We are the inheritors of that complicated development and that liturgical tradition. So when Presbyterians in the 1970s and following went looking for guidance in the reformation of our worship, when they began to realize that our worship service was not as it ought to be, it was natural, I would say inevitable, that they turned to that tradition for guidance. And so there are now striking similarities between Presbyterian worship services and those of Catholic, Anglican, and Lutheran churches, churches that historically made more of the ancient tradition of Christian worship than we did.

On the other hand, the liturgical tradition of the Christian church is hardly uniform. Churches *never* worshipped in precisely the same way. There is no service liturgy for a Christian church in the Bible, an outline of a Sunday worship service. If there were, we would all do it the same way and would always have done so. But absent such direct instruction in the Word of God, the liturgical tradition of Christendom is custom only. It may be based on sound principles, it may be sanctified by long use, it may have the approbation of generations of faithful Christians, but no one can say that *this and this alone* is the way Christians should order their worship service. For that matter, the Puritan/Presbyterian tradition is also part of the liturgical tradition of Christendom. Most of the features of that tradition we have come to reject as at least inferior if not positively counter-productive, but there are features of that tradition that were excellent and ought to be kept. The sermon in most Roman Catholic and Anglican services is a pathetic excuse for the preaching of the Word of God. We may reject certain features of the Presbyterian tradition – very long prayers by the minister, all prayer offered by the minister himself, singing only psalms, no choral music, the congregation largely sitting silent throughout, infrequent communion, and so on – *but we intend to keep the Presbyterian sermon*!

But these facts require a church – particularly in the revolutionary generation in which we are living – to develop its liturgy and, in our historical moment, to develop it somewhat on its own with the resources available to it. Thankfully there are many more resources available to us than there were a generation ago. And so it is that church after church worships in slightly different ways with somewhat different forms in a somewhat different order. Tonight I want to conclude by introducing you to some of the practices that are becoming more common in Presbyterian churches of our type but which we have not or not yet introduced into our Lord's Day worship. I mention **--** as illustrations only, hardly a complete list **–** these practices for several reasons.

1. The new pastor of the congregation may favor them and we may, therefore, find ourselves incorporating them into our worship. Might as well get ready for some possible changes.
2. These are all practices that certainly *can be done, might be done, and for which a substantial argument* can be made. One reason they are being done by others is because they have been persuaded that these practices commend themselves for sound reasons.
3. Some of them I have myself considered introducing but decided not to in part because I knew I was coming to the end of my ministry and thought this not the best time to introduce a practice that the new minister might not approve of.
4. I do not claim to be a liturgical scholar and the next man might know much more than I do about what we might do to perfect our worship of God, for his sake and for ours, and therefore I'm perfectly happy to await developments.

Let me then mention just a few of these possible changes to pique your interest, mostly by way of addition.

The *first* I want to mention is one I don't agree with. We will have to face the fact that we don't yet all agree about what ought to be done, how best to worship God, what we might do to perfect our own worship of him on the Lord's Day. The first is the addition of an OT reading and a NT reading to the liturgy, a very common feature of Anglican or Episcopalian worship, for example. There are a number of PCA churches that have these two readings of the Word of God in their Sunday morning worship. I have never favored it for the obvious reason that it seems to me an artificial distinction that, however deeply fixed in the Christian mind, is foreign to the Bible itself. The Bible does not know of an OT and a NT if by those terms is meant two parts of the Bible, the first 39 books and the last 27. In the Bible itself, the Bible is one! – one Word of God from beginning to end. It was a fateful moment in Christian history when those terms got attached to parts of Holy Scripture. Much mischief has resulted from it. We read the law of God from both the OT and the NT in our worship because the same law is found in the scriptures of both epochs. We read the gospel from both the law and the prophets and the gospels and the epistles because the same gospel can be found in Exodus and in Romans. There is a lot of the Bible in our worship service, as there ought to be, but I have not favored adding readings simply to take one from earlier parts of the Bible and one from later as if that would have anything to do with the authority or the content of the Word of God.

The *second* is the more common use of responsive readings, in which the minister reads a verse or two or even a portion of a verse and the congregation then reads the rest of the verse or the next verse. I have never been a particular fan of this kind of reading, though responsive reading or singing is certainly a feature of the biblical psalter. But in its practice in most churches the alternations do not follow the biblical pattern. The most distinctive feature of Hebrew poetry, as you know, is parallelism, versets, that is poetic lines that mirror one another, that relate to one another in some obvious way, by repetition, amplification or contradiction. But most responsive readings run roughshod over the parallelism and simply use the verse divisions of the Bible, introduced two thousand years or more after the writing of the psalms and having nothing to do with the parallelism of the poetry. If you want to prove that to yourself, simply look at the responsive readings provided in the back of *Trinity Hymnal*. There is no particular rationale for what is in light type and what is in dark – that is, for what the minister says and what the congregation says – except that those are the verses in the Bible.

Such responses are nowadays very commonly used for a call to worship. I have been in churches recently in which this is done and also at worship services at presbytery. But I think that a mistake in another way as well. The minister's office – as the voice of the Lord to his people – authorizes him to call the people of God to worship. The congregation can't call itself, the choir can't call the congregation to worship; only the minister can do that. I don't think any of you would imagine that if you were to walk up to the palace of the Almighty, without ringing the doorbell or knocking on the door, you would simply open the door and walk in. You expect to be invited into the presence of the Great and he is the greatest of the great. It is the Lord's prerogative to call his people into his presence; a prerogative that no man can assume to himself. So, in my view, a responsive reading used as a call to worship betrays the lack of a biblical liturgical theory, the principles according to which the liturgy proceeds in form and content. That is my conviction and that is why we haven't used responses at the opening of the service as is now frequently done in other of our churches. God's people cannot welcome themselves into the house of the Lord!

A *third* possible change concerns the color of the ministers' robes. The color of a minister's robe is entirely traditional. It would be difficult to make an argument that the color of the priest's robe according to the Law of Moses was meant to be the law for all subsequent Christian ministers. But even if it were, we don't know for sure what the robe looked like or what those colors were, since we are not told precisely how the gold, blue, purple, and scarlet yarns and the linen were combined to create the finished robe. In the Catholic and Anglican churches the minister's robe is often white and often changes color depending upon the season of the year. The minister wears a different colored robe in Lent than at Easter, for example. Should we do something like that?

I was in a church recently in which the minister wore a white robe with green bands. It was striking. In the Reformed tradition, which carried over the ordinary robe of the medieval clergyman, the minister wore black and for that reason and no other, ministers here are dressed in black robes. Should there be more color, brighter colors in the front of the church? I've wondered about that myself. There can be no law, to be sure, for the Bible does not address the question. The rationale for robes in the Bible is simply that the office of the minister might have dignity and honor. What bestows that dignity and honor – whether the style of the robe or its color – no doubt changes from culture to culture and from time to time. We still think of black as a solemn color, not so much a joyful color, and that fits the traditional Presbyterian about worship. It is for solemnity that ministers and judges have long worn black. But should we do things to lighten the atmosphere? Good question!

A *fourth* possible change would be the introduction of some ancient forms into our liturgy. A principal example would be the *sursum corda*, Latin words that mean literally "Upwards our hearts," but are usually translated "Lift up your hearts" to which the congregation traditionally responds, "We lift them up to the Lord." The historic form of the full *sursum corda* reads:

Minister: Lift up your hearts.
People: We lift them up to the Lord.
Minister: Let us give thanks to the Lord.
People: It is meet and right to do so.

Historically the *sursum corda* opened the ancient eucharistic liturgies; that is, it was a feature of the transition to the Lord's Supper in the worship service of the early church, or at least many of them. It fell out of use in much of Reformation worship as part of the simplification of the ceremonial. [W.D. Maxwell, *The Liturgical Portions of the Genevan Service Book*, 28-31; *An Outline of Christian Worship*, 99] Calvin, for example, who was very attuned to the worship of the early church and wanted in many respects to revive it in Geneva, apparently did not retain the *sursum corda* in his own liturgy. It was the regularly repeated formulas – thought to encourage mindlessness in worship – that tended to be removed from the liturgy, though not in all the Reformation churches. The Anglicans, for example, retained the *sursum corda* in the *Book of Common Prayer*, their manual for public worship. Beside the *sursum corda*, we might regularly sing the *Kyrie* or the *Sanctus.*

I admit that I have a certain aversion to the constant repetition of formulas of identical wording. But perhaps that is just my own prejudice. What do you think?

A *fifth* possible change might be standing for the reading of God's Word. What is usually meant is that the congregation is to stand for the reading of the text upon which the sermon is to be preached. But it would not be clear to me why we would stand for that reading of the Bible but not, for example, when we read together a portion of God's law. This practice has reappeared as a liturgical form in a number of our PCA churches in recent years. I fully understand the significance of the practice. Standing is a way of embodying reverence and standing for the reading of God's Word would be a visible way of expressing our sense that in reading the Word of God we are listening to the very voice of the Almighty. That is certainly a fundamental Christian conviction and the basis of many more fundamental convictions. By embodying that conviction we are fixing it in our hearts and the hearts of our children and bearing witness to the world that the Bible is the very word of God. All to the good.

The problem I find with introducing into our practice is two-fold. First we already stand to sing and to pray and if we were then to stand for the reading of the Word of God we would be standing through almost the entirety of the service up to the sermon. We would kneel for the confession and sit during the offering, but otherwise we would be standing. That is a long time to stand.

More problematic still is my custom of making extensive comment on the text as it is read. The reading lasts much longer when comments are added to it. I have a feeling that to stand for the reading of the Word might more provoke tiredness than express reverence.

A new minister is certainly going to introduce us to new hymns and new forms for our use in worship. We may begin to sing the *Kyrie* or the *Sanctus*, we may sing new responses after the offering has been taken, and so on. But he may also have ideas about the liturgy itself and they may be very good ideas for which we will soon learn to be grateful. We should look forward to any and every opportunity to deepen, to enrich, to purify, to empower, to beautify the worship we offer to God. The desire to do so should always be a characteristic of Faith Presbyterian Church.