

“What is SPC Worship?” based on the History of Reformed Worship, 1 Corinthians 13, Psalm 148

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on February 2, 2025, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

Today, we are going to do something a little different in our Worship service. We are going to explain what worship is, what it means, how it is structured, and why we do what we do each and every week together in community. Here at Shelby Presbyterian Church, every week starts in this way – with prelude followed by a welcome and announcements.

The prelude is intended to gently have us sum up our conversations with music, usually selected by Emily to be a tune that invites a prayerful response or to help us to call to mind words of a familiar hymn to bring us into a calm state. We do our welcome and announcements right away, essentially to frame the service.

After the announcements, the Call to Worship is a responsive prayer, in which we hear a truth drawn from scripture and respond to it. The Lay Assistant in speaking from scripture speaks God’s word, and we respond to that word from the bulletin. Responsive prayer is central to our worship service, because we are not spectators in our tradition. We are participants. So, as Mystie will ask you to ready yourself to hear from God’s word, based on Psalm 71, you will hear her afterward invite you to “rise as you are able,” to sing a hymn of praise. This language is intentional because not all of us may be able to stand, but we can all be moved to rise up in our own way, to respond in praise of our God who loves us.

Each week, we are called to confess our sin. This means we tell the truth about our sin and our sinfulness. If we say we have no sin, we are deceived. But the good thing is that God pursues us with forgiveness. Because God is faithful and just, God forgives when we confess. Confession is not the pre-condition, but the acceptance of our guilt, which is removed by God’s forgiveness. We are not defined by our sin, but by God’s grace. Our prayer of confession joins our voices as one because we are sinners together. All sin separates us from God. Therefore, we confess with one voice, asking for forgiveness as individuals within a community.

Central to the good news of Jesus Christ is the forgiveness of sins. Having told the truth about our individual and corporate sin, we receive an Assurance of Pardon to make space for the Holy Spirit to transform us as we turn away from sin and back into the loving embrace of our God. When we really believe that we are guilty but trust that God’s forgiveness is real, then God will not leave us the same person we were. Transformation is about God changing us. Forgiveness means we become more like Jesus.

After the Assurance of Pardon, we sing the Gloria Patri because all glory belongs to the Triune God in all time. We are all equal before God, regardless of any honor or glory bestowed on us by the world. Then, here at Shelby Presbyterian Church, each week we respond to God’s grace and forgiveness by acknowledging God’s glory. Then we demonstrate our equality before God by accepting and extending peace to one another.

Next is our Moments with Children. This is an opportunity to express the theme of the service in a way that is relatable to the kids in our church, as well as prime our adults for what they will receive in the sermon. Carol Ann calls the children up to the front and sits with them. Our children ask great questions that adults might not ask and provide us with a laugh often. In this moment, we minister to the children and the children minister to us, or serve us, in their dependence and trust.

The children help us exactly as they are in who they are right now – not in their potential. In our service the children asked why we do the chime at the end of the service. This seems to be original

to Shelby Presbyterian Church and our chime was made by Joel Spragins from the wood of the former organ. We chime three times on one chime, like the Trinity. They asked why they do plays, and this is because we want children to have an active experience of the scriptures they are learning. We as adults would do well to have a more playful experience with scripture.

They asked why we do a midnight service for Christmas, and this is a part of our church's tradition that we brought back this year. Midnight or late-night services are rooted in a desire to celebrate Christmas immediately with worship, either by coming out after the service on Christmas, or initiating the service right at midnight, so we are ready to respond to God on the day. We were asked why we light candles, and this is because they represent Jesus as the light of the world.

The kids asked why we do ashes on Ash Wednesday, and this is because at the start of Lent we remember we are mortal and that we will die because on Easter we will be reminded that in Christ by the hope of the resurrection we will have eternal life.

When we asked the children why they think we wear robes and stoles, they immediately recognized that the color of the stole is significant for the season or activity of worship that day. White is for sacraments and the holy seasons of Christmas and Easter, purple is for Advent and Lent, Red is for Pentecost, ordinations, and confirmation. Green is for ordinary time, either in the Season after Epiphany, or the Season after Pentecost. The stole itself is a symbol of the towel Jesus wore around his neck as he washed feet at the Last Supper, and in the Presbyterian tradition, our robes, which are not required, are scholar's robes, recognizing the need for educated clergy. The paraments, or clothes on the chancel, match for the season.

On this Sunday, we did a Five-Cents-A-Meal collection, and the children knew it is to raise money to help people with a donation of five cents for every meal you eat each month. Three of the five cents go to the Presbytery of Western North Carolina for food programs to combat hunger in the region, while the remaining 2 cents stay with Shelby Presbyterian Church for the Emergency Assistance Program, by which we help neighbors in need with bills. We have the children do the collection because...well they're cute and get more and more donations. Afterward, we pray to dedicate the funds to the service of God in response for what has been given to us.

Next, at Shelby Presbyterian Church we typically have two readings with a choir anthem or special music between. Bruce and Emily and the choir pick the anthems to match the readings and expand on some aspect within them.

Scripture is central to our faith as Presbyterians in the Reformed Tradition. We believe that reading scripture and therefore, having it read, proclaimed, and lived is the primary means by which we can recognize God's action in our world. As such, the Prayer for Illumination has been a part of Reformed worship for 500 years. We pray for the Holy Spirit to intercede on our behalf and help us to understand and respond to what is read.

our entire worship service is centered on scripture, both in its direct use and in its application. Traditionally, scripture is read apart from the sermon. This is so that the people can hear the Word directly before it is preached. There are usually between one and four readings, and here at Shelby Presbyterian Church, we typically choose two readings, one from the Old Testament, and one from the New Testament using the Revised Common Lectionary as our guide. The second reading is the one that is the primary text for the sermon.

SERMON – Our second text was Psalm 148, in which the Psalmist says, "Praise the Lord! From the heavens and from the earth, Praise the Lord!" Or in Hebrew, "Hallelujah! Min hassamayim wa min haaretz, Hallelujah!" The Psalmist calls us to worship, to praise, and give glory to God, praising the

name of the Lord in creation and beyond. Why? Because in heaven – the place where God dwells fully – and here on the land, the earth, in creation, God is with us, present to us, and active.

As we have been explaining each part of the service as we go, for most of us, we probably have not had every detail of the service explained. After all, you come to Worship and it just is – everything is decent and in order, and you follow along in your bulletin as best you can. But the truth is that the way liturgy is crafted, and songs are selected, is neither haphazard, nor dictated from above by the denomination. It is both in keeping with longstanding tradition and it is in response to scripture today. The pattern of our worship services has roots in Christian worship for the past 2,000 years and beyond.

In the Old Testament, God gave many direct instructions for Temple worship. There were multiple kinds of sacrifices to be made, prayers to be said, and rules to be observed. From this, there is a discernable pattern for their experience, life, and worship. God calls and the people respond. Sin happens and atonement is needed. Atonement is given, the people are transformed by repentance, and a meal is shared with God. Rinse, repeat, rinse, repeat. This is the pattern of the Old Testament.

Ultimately, all of this centers around God's action, and most of all, God's incredible mercy. God remains faithful to the people no matter how many times they mess up, or how terrible they are. God pursues them.

This is central to the difference between the Israelite religion and their neighbors. For Israel, their God does not need them, yet pursues them and calls out to them. In ancient near eastern and Greco-Roman religions, the gods need people. In fact, many traditions, like the Bible, have a near extinction event. People like to point out the floods and extinction events as if the Bible stole them. Except, that in the Bible, the Judeo-Christian God spares Noah out of God's mercy, preserving humanity for the sake of humanity.

The ancient near eastern and Greco-Roman traditions assert that humanity is preserved by the gods, because the gods need them and their work, to offer sacrifices and feed them. It's a big difference. Obviously, something traumatic happened in our history that is preserved by these stories. One tradition saw God saving humanity, while the others saw selfish gods that needed someone to keep cooking meals for them.

Sacrifice in the Israelite tradition is not about earning God's favor. It is about demonstrating the desire of the one sacrificing to be at one with God, or atoned with God. Atonement is literally a mashed up, made up word to translate reconciliation with God, so the word is "At-One-Ment" or "atonement. It means reconciled to God. Atonement means being made right, or justified, with God.

The ancient religions around Israel had their own little scientific process – They did trial and error to get the favor of the gods. If a sacrifice of some kind gained favor, great, then you keep doing that one. You tried to repeat it, and if stopped working, you knew you had to up your game. You had to do something more to earn the god's favor.

In the Israelite tradition, God's favor was a given – they were the chosen people. But still, they were tempted and gave in to the desire to be like the nations around them. This was most clearly seen when they asked for a king to be like the nations. God was their king, but they did not have the faith to trust God in this role. So, as God's people became more like the nations, so did their practices, which is why Jesus called out the hypocrisy of the Pharisees.

Jesus comes then to right the ship and restore God by taking his rightful place as our King. The Father sends the Son out of love for the world, to redeem it and restore it. This is so that whoever

believes in the Son shall not be destroyed, but have eternal life. This means God enters creation uniting heaven and earth fully in Jesus, who demonstrates for us the Kingdom while living in our limits. He suffers for us, dies for us, and rises again for us.

The pattern of worship in Old Testament scriptures is the pattern of the Gospel. God comes to the people, calling them, as Jesus did in proclaiming the Kingdom. Jesus is the ultimate atoning sacrifice because he is fully God and fully human, completely at one with God and us. He is God dying in our place, and not an animal in the sacrificial system. And it is then by his death, that the power of sin and death are destroyed. It is by his rising that we see these powers are truly defeated, and by his ascension that the Holy Spirit is now with us, living in and among us as individual temples, and as one large corporate temple of God in the church.

As temples, God must be sure we are cleansed, so God pursues us with forgiveness, because God loves us too much to let us just be bogged down by sin. You see, sin is separation from God, and it is real and pervasive. Sin is when we hear from God and do not respond to God. We respond instead to our own wants and desires, our own idea of what is good and what is evil. Sin is not an exhaustive list of things not to do, nor is sin an exhaustive list of things we haven't done. Sin is the things we do or don't do, because they're more important to us than God and God's love.

God's love, however, suffers long – it is patient. God's love is kind, helpful to us. God's love does not desire what belongs to someone else, nor does it boast. It is not arrogant or rude, nor does it seek to force its own way. It is not provoked, nor does it keep a long list of evils. Love forgives. It does not rejoice in suffering but rejoices in truth. Love bears all things, believes or trusts all, hopes for all, and most of all it endures, through it all. God's love is faithful and never ends. This is the love we are called then to return to God and to one another.

There are no set rules for worship in the New Testament, apart from the Lord's Day as Sunday, for which we can notice Jesus's post-resurrection appearances happen on Sundays. Then there is the command to "Do this in remembrance of me" and baptize our members. However, for 2000 years Worship has shared a commonality with our Jewish roots, and the story of the gospel where God calls and we respond. We sin and we are made one with God again – in the atonement of Jesus. We hear from God and are called to be transformed. We respond in transformation, and we share a meal. This is all done so that we can know God's love fully and share God's love in the world around us. This is the pattern.

Know that you are loved – and loved so much that God wants what's best for you – a life turning away from sin. God calls out to you, pursues you, active and alive, giving you every opportunity to respond to this love, saying yes to the Lord to be transformed by the Lord, and share the love of the Lord in the world. Worship is our primary purpose, not because God wants a worship service, but because it is the right response to what God has done for us.

In all of life, our response to God is our worship – in what we do for others, and how we serve, how we pray and how we engage scripture. All of those come together each Sunday in Worship. This is why we do what we do in Worship. Amen.

OTHER ASPECTS OF THE SERVICE: In response to the sermon, we typically sing a hymn of response. Then comes the Affirmation of Faith, which our tradition says to do regularly, but which we choose at SPC to do weekly. We use the Apostle's Creed or Nicene Creed, a credal passage from scripture, or an excerpt from one of the confessions, catechisms and statements of faith in our Book of Confessions. We switch this up in every season so you get a little variety in the ways we can concisely express the core of our faith that we share with Christians of every denomination.

In the Prayers of the People, we as one church, respond to God's love by asking God as a unified church to intervene in the world. In doing this, we act as a community, praying for each other's prayer requests. In this moment, we are one body, and one member of Christ's body. We are united with one another in seeking God's action. We finish by praying the Lord's Prayer, which calls for God's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, as we promise to forgive, as we ask for forgiveness, desiring for God to lead us.

As you can see, the end of the service shifts even more to our response to God. Having been called, forgiven, and taught, we state our faith, pray, and now give. Giving is an essential response to God's gift of grace in Jesus Christ, who gave his life for us, so that we might have life in him. We are grateful for your gifts of prayer to lift up others to God and join with them in making petitions for God's intervention. We are grateful for the doers, who respond in action in the church and in the community in service to God. We thank also the donors, who give generously not only to this church but in the community as well. In giving here for the church and in the community, we ensure God's love is shared with others by our faithful presence as a church and as individuals.

On this, a Communion Sunday, we celebrate this holy sacrament, which is a physical sign of the inward grace, or unmerited gift of Jesus Christ. This is a meal Jesus instituted, just as God instituted the Passover meal. This is a point of continuity where we see Jesus as God. It can be called the Eucharist, meaning 'Thanksgiving,' the Lord's Supper because he instituted it, or Communion, because it brings us by faith and the Holy Spirit into the presence of Jesus and connects us to all churches and believers in every age.

Our Communion Liturgy starts with the invitation to the table, by which we invite all who are seeking a relationship with God to join in the meal, which is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet in the new creation. It is not a reward for good faith now, but food for our journey to that moment. We initiate the Great Thanksgiving by lifting our hearts to God. This prayer has three parts – one expounding our gratefulness for God the Father, another for God the Son in Jesus, and another thanking and calling down the Holy Spirit to transform the elements and transform us by them to be the body of Christ in the world.

Then we have the words of institution, the very words recorded in scripture from Jesus himself on the night he was betrayed, when he said, "Do this in remembrance of me." We share this meal together at SPC, either by the elders passing the plates, or by intinction, when the bread is dipped in the juice. We end with a Prayer after Communion asking God to make the meal effective in us.

At the end, we have the charge and benediction. The charge is a summary of the main point of the day's scripture and liturgy. It is meant to leave you with a key takeaway for our transformation. The word benediction means "good words," or "blessing." My task as a minister is not to bless you myself, but to speak words of God's blessing for you. These good words are the promise of God to draw you nearer to God. It reminds us to recognize that God is near to us.

And so, for our charge and blessing, hear this: You are loved by God, who calls out to you, pursuing you. God is alive and active, and we are called to respond to God's love. It is through worship that we praise God for this and seek transformation. God loves us too much to let us remain as we are. Each week, Worship is designed to open us up to this truth. Likewise, this church is not this building, but all of you, a community called to love and support one another, as we love God and love our neighbors, in and throughout the world.

May the blessing of almighty God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, descend upon you now and remain with you always. Amen.