

“Together in Praise”- Jeremiah 31:7-9, John 17:20, 21, Acts 2:46, 47

Over the last four weeks we have been looking at 5 characteristics that brought the early church together in strong unity. As a result the early church changed the world. I have been challenging our church to remember these 5 unifying characteristics so that we too can make a difference in the world. The first characteristic is to be unified in prayer. The second is to be unified in presence in the world. The third area is to be unified in possessions. We are to be generous in helping others. The fourth area we looked at last week was unified in priorities. This week we look at the last characteristics is to be unified in praise.

I have discovered over the years of ministry that many if not most people are uncomfortable in showing emotion especially in public and that includes the church. You know real men don't cry. There are many people who are uncomfortable showing or expressing emotion or praise to God. Unfortunately the practice of praising God has gotten a bad rap. Often when people think of praise they think of fanatical Christians throwing up their hands, shouting, dancing, and clapping their hands, appearing to be somewhat out of control. The praise of God may include all of those things. I have been in churches where that kind of praise is done and even encouraged. However one does not have to do all of those things to praise God.

As I said earlier praise and showing of emotions are something that most of us are uncomfortable with. Most of us tend to be no-nonsense practical people. We approach life with questions like, “What good will this do for me? What am I going to get out of this? How much will it cost me? How long will it take me to do it?” Unfortunately there are many who approach praise and faith in God the same way. Most of us think that one's faith must be totally useful. Time and time again I have had people in my churches come up to me after the service and have told me how useful and practical the sermon was. They, however, made no comment whether or not the hymns, the anthem, or the prelude moved them in any way. Many people say, “Just give me the sermon, the marching orders, the useful God stuff I can use to help me get through next week.”

However one's faith is more than just being useful. One's faith can be experiential. One's experience with God can be more than just practical marching orders or directions. It is more than dos and don'ts. Our experience with God can include the emotional. We can have amens, alleluias, and unexpected tears, joy, and praise.

The early church in their ministry to one another and to the world offered a time of worship that included the praising of God. It had emotions. It included great singing and praising of God. In verse 47 of Acts 2, Luke tells us that the early church with gladness and sincerity of heart praised God. Their praise came as they were filled with the Holy Spirit. Before they went out to change the world they spent time in praise of God. You can effectively praise God when you know God. God was the center of their activities so they naturally offered praise and thanksgiving to God.

Go with me to 5½ centuries before the birth of Christ. God's people had been in captivity in Babylon for 70 years. Now they were permitted to go back to their homeland. It was a time for rejoicing and celebration. Jeremiah, the prophet of God of the day, calls upon the people to offer up praise for God for the miracle to be allowed to return home.

In verses 7-9 of Jeremiah 31, he describes the joyful homecoming of a people who had been scattered to a foreign land with different language and customs. Now they were coming home. The joy is not only because the people have the opportunity to go home, but also and more importantly they had been changed. They were no longer the proud sinful people separated from God. Over the past 70 years God had gently begun to win their hearts back. The people came back weeping and praying. The joy is that God in his vast love was welcoming his people back. Praise came as God began to help the people to become again what God wanted them to be. The people were grateful and expressed it through a joy and praise of God.

Praise isn't something we ought or must do. Praise is a response to something. It is the response to someone's action on us. When a team scores a touchdown or makes a basket or scores a goal you don't have to tell the crowd to

cheer. Recently the Cleveland Cavaliers of the NBA won the championship and it was the first time in 52 years that Cleveland could celebrate a major sport championship. People ran out into the streets praising the team and celebrating. Hanging off the roofs of buildings to see the team. It brought feelings of pride for the city.

Praise is like that. God brings about good things in our life and we feel proud of what and who we are in God. Praise is a response to God's love. Praise is a response for what God has done for us. Psalm 134 is a very short psalm of praise. It is one of 15 psalms used as a hymn book by the pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem. The key word is to bless. God blesses us. The word bless means that we have a sense of wellbeing that comes when we are in tune with God. Being blessed is when we allow God to bless us as if all of life feels right and makes sense. Psalm 134 invites us to lift hands and voices in gratitude. When you and I praise the Lord it brings a deep feeling of joy that weathers all of the storms of life.

Harvey Penick is a name probably not familiar to most of us. He was a golf-pro who became successful in golf later in his life. He wrote several how-to books on golf. Starting in the 1920s he had kept a red notebook for years jotting down observations about golf. In 1991 he took to a local author who told him it was worth publishing. A week later a publishing company had agreed to an advance of \$90,000. The Book was going to be called "Harvey Penick's Little Red Book: Lessons and Teachings from a Lifetime in Golf". You can order it off Amazon still. I checked.

When the author later saw Penick he observed that the man was troubled. When asked the matter he told the writer that he had a lot of medical bills and he could not advance the company \$90,000 for the book. The writer had to explain to Penick that he was to receive the \$90,000. What a tremendous joy for Harvey Penick to discover that he was not to give the money but to receive it. What a joy and praise and celebration when we discover that we don't have to pay God anything for he has paid it all. The joy of praise comes when we ask, "What must I do?" God answers, "Just receive." Then we praise him.

We come to church on Sunday with our mental notepad and we get our marching orders for the week. But that is not worship at its best. Sunday is at its best when for a short time we can put aside the tomorrows, the shoulds, the musts, and the oughts and lose ourselves in God. We are reminded that here is someone beyond our self-absorbed selves that loves us and wants our attention. I hope at the end of the service as you get ready to go back in the world that you certainly got the point of the message, but that you also experienced the closeness of God. If you do, then I have been successful.