

**CHURCH**  
Randall Tremba  
October 30, 2016  
31st Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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**Luke 19:1-10**

Then Jesus said to Zacchaeus, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham."

**2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12**

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church ("ekklesia") of the Thessalonians. We give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, because your faith is growing abundantly and your love for one another is increasing. Therefore we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith.

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Someone asks: *Are going to church this Sunday* by which they mean going to a particular building. Then someone asks: *How was church* by which they mean how was the service. And then there's this: *Let the church say* (Amen) where church means people. So what is "church?"

Soon after I began serving this church 40 years ago when there was only one service and just 35 or so people on these pews on any given Sunday, I asked a young man why he wasn't in church last Sunday. And without apology he told me. *I don't have to go to church to worship God. I can worship God in the mountains or on the river.*

To which I said: *no you can't. You must come to church to worship God. Sunday morning is the time and church is this place. You need to attend the worship service.*

To which he said. *No, I don't.*

It took me only about 10 seconds to realize that young man was right. We don't have to go to church to worship God.

So why then do we come here on Sunday morning if not to worship God?

That question got under my skin. I had been raised as a child and educated in seminary on the notion, like many of you, that we go to church to worship—a holy place, a holy time, a holy ritual led by holy clergy.

That, as it turns out, is a medieval notion and based on a false dualistic paradigm. That paradigm divides the world and experience into sacred and profane. We now know better—thanks in part to our own John Calvin's declaration that the natural world is "the theater of God's glory." Heaven and earth are one. We are one. All is one.

The church, Calvin claimed, is not a building or a service or the clergy. The church is people, a community that gathers in what's most appropriately called, a Meeting House, as this was first called in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. And yet, due to tradition and convention, Presbyterians use church to designate their building.

The ministers in Calvin's congregation would not be regarded as clergy or priests since all of us, he declared, are priests through our baptism. In Presbyterianism there is no clergy-laity distinction.

Thus, Presbyterian ministers are regarded as teachers in a particular kind of school. My official title is "Teaching Elder." Historically, Presbyterian ministers did not wear

priestly vestments but rather a black academic gown like those worn by professors in Calvin's Geneva in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

I wore such a gown for 10 years or so until I realized professors at Shepherd didn't wear gowns. They wore suits or, in some cases, blue jeans and a shirt. So, I split the difference, happy to put away the gown, disregard the suit and adopt this hybrid look (collarless black shirt and jacket) in keeping with Calvin's mantra: *Reformed and always reforming*.

Calvin was a Bible scholar. In order to critique and reform the medieval, hierarchical church controlled by bishops, he carefully examined the Bible and discovered that the word "church" in the New Testament, translates a Greek work *ekklesia*, meaning an assembly. At that time it was not a religious word.

You can hear *ekklesia* in our word *ecclesiastical*. *Ekklesia* literally means "called out" as in the "calling out" of citizens from their various homes to assemble for discussion or debate in the public forums of Greek cities.

*Ekklesia* was the preferred term to describe the emerging communities inspired by the life of Jesus. There were no church buildings or church services.

The Apostle Paul often wrote to the "churches" or assemblies gathered in homes. He once urged such a community to "not forsake the *assembling* of yourselves together."

It would take me awhile to discover the significance of "assembly. But over the past 10 years or so—you may have noticed—I welcome you to *this Sunday morning assembly*. It echoes the Presbyterian use of "assembly" as in General Assembly when Ruling Elders and Teaching Elders from across the nation assemble every other year in one place to discuss and debate the work of the whole church.

To accentuate this understanding (and see if anyone would notice), several months ago I added "assembly" to the Sunday morning schedule in the bulletin. *Assembly: liturgy of the word*. Several of you asked about that term since it is strange and not conventional and, for some, evokes bad memories of school assemblies. I happen to have loved those assemblies.

The problem I discovered with "worship service" is that it reinforces dualistic thinking and suggests a "going through the car wash kind of experience." It also emphasizes a vertical relationship to God and neglects the horizontal dimension of community.

After a particular service back in my early days, a certain parishioner complained to me about my mentioning various conditions of some members and mentioning something about a social justice issue—could have been racism or militarism or global warming. I don't remember. But I remember the complaint: *I don't come to church to hear about the conditions of other members or the issues in society. I come here to worship God.*

Soon after I happened to phone a church in town. I got a voice announcing their "worship service" every Sunday at 11:00. It was a Protestant church. Really, I said to myself. You can guarantee that? You can guarantee worship at a particular time?

Later I called a catholic church and got this recording. *Liturgy. Sunday morning at 11:00*. And that triggered an epiphany.

You can't guarantee worship at any hour but you can guarantee a liturgy. And just like that I changed our Sunday morning notice from "worship service" to "liturgy of the word."

Liturgy is a ritual, as much as your workout in the gym or wellness center is a ritual, designed to make you more fit and healthy. In a similar way, liturgy is designed to make us more whole and wholesome.

Liturgy literally means “the work of the people.” I liked that emphasis on people and community. And that prompted me to see this time together as a kind of weekly thanksgiving dinner ritual, a soul feast with family, symbolically around this table every Sunday. That’s why I stand at the table every Sunday to welcome you.

It also occurred to me that if this time together is about our various households gathering as one family it should include leadership by all age groups. And that led to what you see today: children as leaders of the liturgy.

I liked and still do like the idea of “liturgy.” But over time I felt something was missing. If “worship service” puts the emphasis on going through the motions to get ourselves right with God, liturgy puts the emphasis on work and misses what I consider a very important aspect of our time together and that is *being*. Not doing; but being. Just being together—sembled as one community not to work at something but to enjoy and celebrate the connections that make us a household of faith and not a spiritual car wash or a spiritual fitness center.

Assembly is also a school term. How cool is that? Like any school, this school of love calls us from our various classrooms to an assembly where for a brief while we simply remember who we are.

And that brings us to the gospel lesson.

Once upon a time Jesus paid a visit to the house of the most deplorable person in town. Zacchaeus, with the backing of the Roman Empire, had exploited and defrauded his compatriots. He lived in a “House of Gold.” He was despised and had come to despise himself.

But Jesus saw him with different eyes and publicly declared him to be a true “son of Abraham.” At that time nothing more commendable could be said of someone. At that moment Zacchaeus remembered who he was and it changed his life.

And that is why we assemble here every Sunday, gathered in around a table by the Beloved, to remember that no matter how deplorable we may think ourselves to be, we are indeed, beloved children of God. It’s not about the work we do; it’s about being together with the Beloved.

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**HYMN 401**  
“Gather Us In”