

Acts 1:12-14; 2:1-4; John 17:20-23
The Vows: Prayers and Presence
Sunday October 22nd, 2017

Today is the 2nd in our series on our Membership vows as part of our Consecration Sunday Stewardship program. We are looking at our membership vows as part of the stewardship God has given us here on earth. Most here have heard many stewardship sermons over the years and most deal with money.

Indeed at the end of this series on November 12th we will be making our financial pledges for 2018 for the work of God's Kingdom here at Vista Church, but stewardship and what we have stewardship over for God encompasses so much more.

Part of a stewardship campaign is taking a good look at ourselves and how we are taking care of what God has given us. How are we being a good member/steward of the gifts God has given us in the Body of Christ? How are we taking care of the vows we made to God when we joined the church?

A steward is one who has been given the authority and responsibility (stewardship) to take care of something for someone else. In our case it's a pretty big someone else. It's God!

Now to remind everyone, our membership vows are based on the Great Commandment as was laid out two weeks ago. I want to thank Mr. John Witt for bringing us a great message last Sunday on the Reformation and Wesleyan Quadrilateral. We have some great lay preachers in our congregation and even some younger ones coming up.

I have had one young woman request to preach at one of our upcoming contemporary services and I am going to work with her to see that that happens.

Anyway, here is the Great Commandment as Jesus called it from Mark 12: 29-31, “Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the

Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your

strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

This is Biblical basis for our membership vows which is easier to see when we lay this out in the form of a chart like this:

“Love the Lord your God with”

	Connected to	
<u>All</u> your heart	>	Witness
<u>All</u> your mind	>	Prayers
<u>All</u> your soul	>	Presence
<u>All</u> your strength	>	Gifts
Love your neighbor.	>	Service

Today of course we are addressing Prayers and Presence.

Now our two sections of Acts point out very clearly the vitally important connection of: **presence, prayers and power**. They also show that combination of presence and prayers leads to out 5th membership vow of “witness.” Presence, prayers and power lead to witnessing.

Verses 12 and 13 read, “Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day’s

walk from the city. When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying.” Note they were present with each other. Now what were they doing? Verse 14, “They all joined together constantly in prayer.”

So here we have them fulfilling the first to vows of membership in the Body of Christ: Present and Praying. And then we can see what this generated: Power, power to witness which is the 5th membership vow.

Verses 1 and 4, “When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.

All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit

and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.” As Jesus said, “Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”

Now most of us when we think of prayer we think of asking something from God. But prayer is both speaking and listening. It is praising and blessing God. In worship we speak to God in songs, the prayer time and in other points of the service. God speaks to us in the scriptures read and preached, the prayer time, the songs and at times just spontaneously opens the eyes of our hearts to understand. Pay very close attention to what pops into your mind in the midst of worship.



And of course to this day we witness by our love for each other, simply showing up and being kind, gracious, and friendly with each other and all who enter the house of God. I believe this picture of our congregation on Pentecost captures the joy of our fellowship. Our Confession of faith is a marvelous witness to the world, and to anyone showing up to our worship, who isn't yet a believer, because in that confession we declare the basics of our faith.

Now, our John passage speaks to the importance of our being present with each other, in unity, as part of our witness. Jesus put it this way in John 17:20, “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, (witness)

that all of the may be one, (presence)

Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

Now as I prepared this message I realized that the concepts of “Unity and Presence” are being redefined by the internet and by us Live Streaming our worship services. What does it mean to be present here as a member when you live a 1000 miles away and join us Sundays via live stream?

I received a forwarded email from Dee Berman from Ryan Toriello her former care giver who is out in California in nursing school. Hi Ryan! He made me rethink what I said in light of how we are worshipping today. He wrote, *“Hi Dee, Have had several issues with internet, but was able to attend today through the livestream. It was great seeing you, though you couldn't see me. I was there with you in “Spirit”--oh wait, Pastor doesn't support that statement. I liked what he had to say today, particularly the part on prayer and meditation--that's central to my spiritual practice.”*

Last week I said to the effect that wherever our souls are, our spirits are so we can't be present with someone “in spirit”, because we weren't physically present to have our souls there. But as I thought about it, “Yes we can be present ‘In Spirit’ because it is in and through the Holy Spirit that we are worshipping together God. The Holy Spirit that testifies with our spirit brings us together, and brings us together, along with our prayers, into the very presence of God.

I found some beautiful scriptures that illustrate this, Revelation 5:8, “And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb.

Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people.” And Revelation 8:4, “The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of God's people, went up before God from the angel's hand.”



What a beautiful thought, our prayers in this worship service are gathered together and presented in a golden bowl before God, the Lamb. Our prayers however deep and profound, or fleeting and self-centered are gathered together and presented in a precious manner before God.

Another woman named Jeanne from Chillicothe Missouri watches us every Sunday. She doesn't have a local church, so she worships here with us. She wrote, "Many thanks to the prayer team, and also the Live Streaming. So blessed that I can join in on your service." We have a prayer shawl on the altar we are sending her this week.

Last week as John Witt preached this image of the Guttenberg printing press flashed up on the screen.



That technological advancement changed the church as much as I believe the internet is changing it today.



We and many other churches are becoming a church, a place of fellowship and worship for those who can't physically be here. I remember Kavanaugh UMC in Greenville Texas where I first served full time. It was built in a Greek revival style which meant there were about 23 marble steps you had to climb to go to worship. There were no walkers or wheel chairs in that place, because you just couldn't get in with one.

Today we are becoming a church for the home bound, the traveler, those with fear of crowds, those who are allergic to buildings, and perfumes and aftershaves that many wear.

Now it is important for us as disciples of Jesus for as long as we can and as able as we can to physically gather for worship. Disciples of Jesus are naturally drawn to a physical body, the gathered Body of Christ. Jesus physically came to earth. Theologically its' called the Incarnation. But when you can't be here physically then through the Holy Spirit and the technology of the internet you can be present.

Be present while you can in worship. One of the charming things people say about our internet feed is that they love watching everyone gather before the service starts and love on each other here. It is attractive and inspiring. Just look at us!



It is part of your witness that goes out to the world because as soon as you walk into this room you are in a reality show. I call it the **“Ultimate Reality Show”** because we are worshipping and preforming for the Ultimate Reality who is God.

I and the choir and the liturgists; we are the drama directors. The Audience is God, and the world watches our witness. Literally, my friends, the world watches your witness as you are present here.

So work while you can, be present while you can for you know as Jesus said, **“The evil days are coming when no one can work.”** My parents worshiped God on Sundays from the time they were born. They can no longer get out; so I am looking for some way to get this live streaming to them. Be present while you can, because someday you sure will wish you could

The greatest present God has given you is you! When you can, bring your best present back to God. Be present in God's worship in the

presence of the children of God then through your presence and prayer you will receive the power to be God's witnesses in the world.

I close with James 5:16, "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed."

"The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective." May you receive the power and peace that comes through presence and prayer!

What is God saying to you, and what are you going to do?

In Jesus' Name, amen.