

"100 Years in the Sanctuary"

February 1, 2026

First Christian Church

Scripture Text: Acts 2: 37-42

I spent the entire week of sermon preparation asking that simple yet profound question, why? One hundred and forty-five years ago, why did Mrs. J.M. Rogers and Mrs. Angus Brown call together a few Disciples in the area and form a Ladies Aid Society who hosted socials in order to raise money to hire an evangelist to come and preach a revival? Why did the 22 people who responded to the evangelist join the women and form this church? Why did these individuals give their own money and their own sweat and supplies to build a church building? Why? What is it about church that calls forth that kind of investment? Why did they feel the need to continue to upgrade and expand that building? Even when the building was paid off, why did they continue to host socials and dinners to be able to support the church beyond Rochester?

Today we celebrate 100 years of worshiping in this sanctuary which was dedicated in February 1926. Why did they build it? They had a building that was solid enough that they picked it up, turned it 90 degrees and moved it back toward the alley. We still use that building today. It is not like it was falling down and in need of extensive repairs. Why did they need a new sanctuary? Why was the sanctuary the place they chose to expand and improve? And when things got tough, why didn't they give up? After they built this sanctuary, the depression hit and they were unable to pay for it. I read a letter this week from John Wallenburg, the minister at the time, who was writing to the company that was threatening to repossess the organ. He talked about the church leaders talking to creditors and getting our debt reduced by 20-50%. He talked about how far behind the church was in paying his salary, yet he continued to work. We know the stories of individual's sacrificial giving and how the church had to sell our bell to the Catholic Church to help pay bills. Our bell tower still stands empty. We are having a chicken and noodle dinner at noon today in honor of all the chicken and noodle dinners the church members held both here and at the fairgrounds to raise enough money to help pay the mortgage. We know of people like the Turner sisters who mortgaged their own home to borrow enough money to keep the church going. Why would they do that? What is it about church that is so valuable to people that they would do that? Many of you know the answer because you made significant financial sacrifices over and above your regular giving 20 years ago to build the new entrance way, fellowship hall, kitchen, Sunday School space, and bathrooms. Why? What is Church that it claims such a valuable place in our hearts and in our lives?

All these "why" questions have sparked a sermon series which starts today and will continue into the next couple weeks. The series will look into questions like, "What is the church? What is its purpose? Why does it exist? Why is it important to us and why is it important to God?" That is all coming soon, but today we celebrate 100 years in this sanctuary.

One hundred years of worshipping in this space. Imagine all the Scripture these walls have heard. These walls have absorbed over 5000 sermons and 26,000 hymns and songs of praise. Imagine all the weddings when God showed up here and joined people together, all the funerals when God came here and welcomed individuals to their eternal home, all the baptisms and Lord's Suppers when God showed up here to adopt a new person into the family and be present with them through incredible joys and sorrows. Those moments of prayer, those moments of personal conviction and transformation, those moments of peace – imagine all the God moments this place has been a part of.

One hundred years ago they knew they needed a place for all that – a place to worship – and they put in the work to make it happen. Ninety-five years ago, in the midst of the depression, they knew more than ever they needed a place to worship, so they put in more time, hosted more dinners, swallowed their pride and begged for help, risked their own homes and made the necessary sacrifices to keep this place of worship. Why? Why is worship so foundational to who we are?

I think the answer begins with the fact that worship feeds our souls. Just like our bodies need food, water and sleep to survive and thrive, our souls need worship to refresh, refuel and re-energize. Many of you have experienced it for yourselves, if you fail to gather with other believers for very long, you find it hard to find anything to be grateful for. And without a foundation of gratitude, you feel your joy eroding away. Without gathering in worship, you quickly slip into thinking life is all about you, and how you feel. Which is a shortcut to depression, because as Solomon – the wisest man who ever lived, who had all the riches, power and influence imaginable – as Solomon said, on its own, life is just folly. Ecclesiastes 2:11 says “all was vanity and a chasing after wind.” Other translations say, “everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind,” or “Then I took a good look at everything I’d done... I saw nothing but smoke. Smoke and spitting into the wind. There was nothing to any of it. Nothing.” Gathering in worship feeds the soul which brings back the gratitude which brings back the joy and feeds life’s meaning.

That leads right into the next thing worship does. It is de-centering. Worship is one of the best ways to remind ourselves that we are not God and everything in life is not about me. Again, living in a world where you are the center is too small and depressing. It is when we plug into something greater than ourselves that we find meaning and purpose and joy. Worship includes singing praises to God and thanking Jesus for saving us. And by doing that, we are proclaiming that we are not God and that we do in fact need a Savior, which puts our lives back into perspective. That is why so many hate the idea of worship: it reminds them that they are not God.

One of the lessons the people of this church taught us during the depression is when you don't feel like worshipping, is when you need to worship the most. When hard times come – whether defined by financial stress, physical ailment, or relational brokenness – when hard times come, you want to move toward God, not away. The natural inclination is to isolate, to hunker down, and put up walls. But it is in the midst of the pain, in the midst of the agony, that we need to worship in order to move toward God because that is when we need God the most. When we are facing pain and loss is when we need to worship the most.

And we need to worship God. Everyone worships something. Some money, some fame, some possessions. Some people worship status, intellect, even other people. Some worship themselves, their accomplishments, their potential. We worship the pinnacle of what we love. And when you bring your time, your talent, your energy, and your treasure to worship God, it is a statement to yourself and the world about what you love. And again, according to Solomon, bringing that worship to God shows incredible wisdom, because God is the only thing worthy of our worship. Money, fame, possessions and even other people will fail us, for they are folly, vanity, meaningless, smoke in the wind. When we suffer pain and loss, they retreat, where God draws near. God alone is worthy of our worship.

The very word worship comes from the old English word 'woerthship.', as in we worship because God is worthy – worth-ship. And this is the other side of worship – perhaps the greater side. When asked "why do people go to church?" one AI cite answered "to be blessed" with the second answer "to get married." As is often the case, AI only gets part of it. Worship is not all about us and what we get out of it. Yes, worship feeds our souls. Yes, worship helps move us out of the center and toward God. Yes, worship connects us with and makes us a part of something bigger than ourselves, giving us meaning and joy. But worship is more than what we receive. In worship we give. We give God His due. When we first moved to Rochester, my mom and dad helped us buy a nice snowblower. I was looking for a small, electric blower, but they insisted on a two stage, self-propelled beast. And now, every time I blow the driveway clean, I think of them and am grateful. I have even sent them a picture of my freshly cleared driveway with a note of thanks. Multiply that by the God factor. God is the creator of this earth and all that is in it. God is the giver of life, new life, and eternal life. God is the one who brings Spring after a long winter. God is the one who filled our world with such vibrant colors, and gave us eyes and brains that can be mesmerized by them. God created the food cycle and the water cycle and put them into motion. God has done so much for us, given us so much, made so much possible; it is only fitting we should gather to say thank you. God is worthy of that. But we don't just worship God for what God has done, we worship God for who God is. God is the supreme being of the universe. Yet God cares enough about us to send His Son to do whatever it took to bring us home to God again. God's heart alone is worthy of our thanks, our praise, our worship.

We don't worship because God is a megalomaniac who constantly needs us telling Him how great He is. We don't worship to recharge God's batteries or to appease God's anger. We worship to say thank you. We worship because we want to bless God. We worship because God is worthy of our worship and it is the only honest response to who God is and what God has done for us. Let's plan on worshipping here for another 100 years.

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