

**Sermon Series: “Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations”
II. The Practice of Passionate Worship**

Psalm 73:1-20, Luke 18:9-14

May 3, 2020

We continue our sermon series begun last week. The series is based on a book by Robert Schnase, a Methodist Pastor and Bishop. In his book “Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations”, he proposes that vitality and fruitful ministries in churches are based on five practices followed in a consistent fashion. Last week we looked at the first of those practices: radical hospitality. This week we examine the second practice, passionate worship.

For those with any familiarity with the Presbyterian Church, the words “passionate” and “worship” are not typically used in the same sentence! In our denomination, words most likely paired with “worship” might be “well-ordered,” “intellectual,” “controlled,” “unemotional,” maybe even “detached.” But not “passionate.” “Passionate” is a word to be paired with college sports. Putting together the words “worship” and “passionate” would likely defrost the disciples of Jesus often called “God’s frozen chosen”!

Presbyterians are known for their studious, reserved, and well-order approach to, well, everything... including worship. For many of us Presbyterians, the word passion brushes uncomfortably close to experiences of emotionalism and the irrational loss of control. The concept of “passionate worship” may be a stretch for us. Those Wesleyan

Methodists, whose tradition includes the experience of a warmed heart, may be a bridge too far.

Our scripture texts for today do not provide a definition of worship as much as they provide nuances to worship's character. So before going to those texts, I want us to consider the definition of worship. That seems like a proper intellectual approach for us Presbyterians!

Worship is best defined as a human response to an encounter with or awareness of God. In the Old Testament, depictions of this encounter initially focused on an individual's experience. A person's encounter with God or awareness the presence of the Supreme Being, was often mediated by experiences of fear and awe, producing a sense of insignificance and unworthiness. In the face of such a strange and unfathomable experience, human response was to cower and be mute. All that most people could conjure up in the presence of the divine was silence, humble obedience to any divine mandate, and perhaps a few stumbling words of honor and praise of God. In other words, it sounded a lot like typical traditional Presbyterian worship!

Eventually worship evolved into other, equally faithful although different, forms of response to God. One of those expressions became known as "Lament."

We may not be aware of the terminology of "Lament" but we are familiar with the concept. Lament includes "arguing with God"!

Did you know that arguing with God is an aspect of faithful worship? The Bible claims that it is and provides numerous examples of it!!

“God, why did this happen, why do bad people prosper, why do the faithful suffer?” Protesting against injustice and the unfairness of life and God’s seeming complicity with it ~ this is observed in many of the Psalms. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” “Lament” is a legitimate expression of faith; it demonstrates a more approachable relationship with the divine in the vicissitudes of life.

From the personal encounters with God by the patriarchs and matriarchs of the Jewish faith, the focus of worship shifted to the community. We see this in the Exodus as the children of Israel escaped from Egypt, and later as the remnant of Judah returned from exile. At every point in their history, the community bore witness and responded to the great God of deliverance from oppression to freedom.

When Moses stood before Pharaoh and demanded “Let my people go!” do you remember the purpose of Moses’ request? It was to allow the children of Israel to worship God. Biblical freedom has always been rooted, not merely in freedom from oppression but freedom to worship the true God, a God who values the dignity of all creation. Great movements throughout history are founded on this search for freedom: freedom from the tyranny of others’ imposed values and freedom to value for ourselves what we believe to be important and true.

The ancient Jewish community developed institutional forms of worship, such as the practice of sacrifice and Temple worship. Later during periods of exile and dislocation when Temple worship and sacrifice could not be followed, the synagogue was established to provide the community a form of worship that embraced the command to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. The experience of the synagogue established a rhythm of weekly worship. The word “synagogue” means “to bring together” and reflects the community nature of worship as the faithful listen to Torah.

The Christian church followed the Jewish pattern of the synagogue, with a rhythm of weekly worship in community gathered around holy scripture. Christians chose the first day of the week as their Sabbath to commemorate Jesus’ resurrection. At the heart of Christian worship is a reality of God’s deliverance of people from the bondage of fear and sin and death to new life through Jesus Christ.

In his earthly ministry, Jesus embraced both personal worship and community worship of God. He participated in the local synagogue and he gathered with others at the Temple. Jesus modeled an intimate relationship with God, using the language of a son with his father. Jesus prayed in private.

In Luke 18, Jesus tells a parable about the quality of worship.

A pious Pharisee and the sinful tax collector represent opposite poles of religious practice. On the one hand is the most devout. On the other is the most defiled and despised. Both come to worship with others, both have a personal experience in worship.

The difference between these two is the quality of worship. And that difference impacts the fruits of worship as they grow in the lives of people. Worship can lead to wholeness or it can lead to divisiveness and destruction. We expect the devout pharisee to bear the greatest fruits of worship; instead it is the tax collector. The arrogant Pharisee left worship unchanged and untouched by God. The repentant tax collector left renewed and approved by God.

Worship can be used to justify one's own actions and create walls of distinction between people. Like the Pharisee. Or it can be used change one's self and to bridge the distance between God and others. Like the tax collector.

Jesus says worship that honors God demonstrates a shift toward the good through honest self-assessment and humility. The end result of such reflective worship is we human beings discover that before God we all stand on equal ground. Equally sinful, equally forgiven, equally redeemed, equally valued, equally children of the Creator.

The author of Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations links the word "passionate" with the practice of worship. He is not advocating that worship be more emotional. He is not

suggesting the shelving of the intellect. He makes the case for worship being more holistic and engaging for all people. He emphasizes the significance of worship.

In worship, something is at stake, something matters which we won't see anywhere else. In worship something happens within people of faith that won't happen any other place. And the "something that matters" is available to all, not only to a lucky few. It is not the exclusive territory of the pious and devout.

Worship provides people in the community of faith with an alternate perspective on what is important, on values that are life-enhancing and enduring. It calls into question the legitimacy of power and position for its own sake; it redefines significance and influence; it debunks wealth and success as the final determinant of human worth.

Psalm 73 is a psalm of perspective. The psalmist admits his envy of the arrogant and wicked. "People turn and praise them," he says, "and no one finds fault in them. Always at ease, they increase in riches. In vain I have kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been plagued and am punished every morning. But when I thought how to understand this it seemed a wearisome task...." And then comes the kicker: "until I went into the sanctuary of God." For persons of faith, something happens in worship. "Then I perceived their end; truly God you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin, they are destroyed in a moment, utterly swept away."

Worship has the power to disrupt our perspective and give us something completely new and fresh. Worship has the power to re-orient us to the things that make for life and peace and hope.

Sometimes I forget how powerful, how life-altering, the act of worship can be. I forget its power because worship is so easy. There are many options for worship from which to choose. This morning you could choose between any number of broadcasts from all over America. And alternatives exist to worship participation: golfing or boating or reading the New York Times from cover to cover.

Worship can be so forgettable and bland. “Who is preaching this week...? Maybe they’ll sing some hymns I know.... I hope they won’t bring politics into it....”

Mark Labberton, Presbyterian pastor and president of Fuller Theological Seminary, claims in his book *The Dangerous Act of Worship* that everything is at stake in worship. He writes, “The crisis the church currently faces is that our individual and corporate worship do not produce the fruit of justice and righteousness that God seeks.... Scripture indicates that our personal and communal worship are meant to shape our vision and fire our engines to be daring disciples, imitating and sharing the love of Jesus Christ in acts of righteousness and justice.” He concludes by saying, “We are asleep. Nothing is more important than for us to wake up and practice the dangerous act of worship, living God’s call to justice.” (pp. 22-23).

Are we asleep? What is at stake for you, for your family, for your community that brings you to worship? And when you get to worship, do you find anything of substance? Those are crucial questions for this, and every, congregation.

Are we here to be entertained; are we here so someone can make us feel good about ourselves? Are we here to have our prejudices blessed and our assumptions confirmed?

Are we here to be challenged, are we here to learn, are we here to have our failures exposed and find forgiveness so we can move forward? Are you and I here to offer to God our sickness and brokenness and be healed? Are we here to find community among people who may be different from us yet are in so many ways similar?

Who is shaping our vision? What is firing our engines? If it is not the Gospel of Jesus Christ, then what is it? If it is not our worship of almighty God and the reality of God's presence within our lives, then why don't we go golfing or boating?

I hope that we are here because God called our names and we answered, "Here I am, send me." I hope and pray that you and I are here to feed the hungry, to welcome the lonely, to heal the sick, to comfort the broken and lost, to delight in the beauty of being fully human, to bring significance and hope and meaning to others. I hope we are here to be pressed into service for the redemption of the world.

What matters to you? What are you passionate about? The education of children? The empowerment of the impoverished? The pursuit of peace? The dignity of each person? The care for the hurting? Meaningful work and a living wage? The quest for knowledge and the expression of beauty through music and art?

Passionate worship moves us beyond ourselves. It focuses on a vision that God has for the world, a vision of inclusion and wholeness.

What is at stake in our worship at Memorial?

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