

# "How Shall We Worship?"

a sermon by

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**Text: "Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth" (Psalm 96:1).**

**Several years ago an event happened at Spirit Square that caught my attention. It was the Christmas season and Spirit Square was sponsoring Charles Dickens' great play, "A Christmas Carol." You remember in that story the scene that takes place on Christmas Eve in which Ebenezer Scrooge has been visited by the ghost of Christmas past, present, and future. He has seen the great suffering his callousness and miserliness has brought to other people. When he awakes from this nightmare, he realizes that it is Christmas Day and that he is alive. Suddenly, he repents of all his evil and is determined to make a fresh start. In one scene of the play he rushes to the window. He wants to buy a Christmas turkey to send to the family of Bob Cratchett and Tiny Tim. In the play the actor who was portraying Scrooge runs to the window and looking out over the audience, yells to one in**

particular, “You there, boy, come here. Take this gold coin and go and buy the big goose in the butcher’s window.”

At this point something happened in the theater that no one had expected. A young boy got out of his seat, walked down the aisle, and came on the stage. The actor who was playing scrooge had great presence of mind. He handed the young boy the coin and the boy exited the stage. After the play was concluded, the audience gave the young boy a standing ovation.

There is something about that young boy that has always captured my imagination. He thought the actor was speaking to him.

## I.

One of the great debates taking place in the church today centers on the nature of worship and particularly the type of music that is most appropriate for worship. Most large churches today offer traditional worship services and contemporary services as well. Marva Dawn in her book, *How Shall We Worship* points out that the terms “contemporary” and “traditional” in many ways are not helpful. “Contemporary” worship is usually used to describe worship that draws from contemporary forms of music or “praise” hymns, but there is a sense in which all worship is “contemporary” in that it all happens in the present moment.

The same is true when we describe “traditional worship.” That term is not very helpful either because it is not clear as to which traditions we are referring. Do we mean Swedish or Swahili traditions, hymns or chants, the ancient liturgy of the church or the revised liturgies from the Calvinist, Lutheran, or Anglican reformers?

Dawn’s book is helpful because it reminds us that the church has a wealth of hymns, liturgies, and scriptures from which to draw and that conflicts that pit “contemporary” worship over “traditional” worship are not only divisive, they are unnecessary as well.

As any astute observer of worship is aware today, there are a number of pitfalls that surround worship in this country today. By and large we are a culture that loves to be entertained, and there are many people who judge worship as a form of entertainment. Moreover, we are also living in a very self-centered culture that worships the imperial self. Many people come to worship only for what it does to them. They cannot imagine that worship exists to point us to God and not to ourselves. Others come poorly prepared. They wander in, wander through, and wander out. Great things, however, are greatly arrived at and it is difficult for me to imagine how anyone can get much out of worship that is not willing to invest something in it.

And yet, disappointing as worship sometimes may be, there is something about worship that is indispensable to the life of faith and church. So this morning I want to

speaking not only to the question of how we are to worship, but also to the question of why we worship and why worship stands at the center of the life of the church.

## II.

In the first place, in worship we are reminded of values that the world around us often makes us forget. The word worship means “worthship” the recognition and appreciation of real worth. The society in which we live has a way of putting first things last and last things first, makes the great seem small and the small great, and often affects us in ways that we forget what is really important in our lives.

Several years ago I visited the beautiful “St. Sophia Mosque” in Istanbul. For hundreds of years the “Blue Mosque” was one of the most beautiful and important Christian churches in the world, but when the Muslims took over Istanbul, it was changed to a Mosque and Islamic symbols were painted over the Christian art. Today it is a museum. As I stared at one of these symbols, I could see that underneath it, where the paint was beginning to fade, there was a fresco depicting Christ with outstretched arms and I could not help but sense that in some way that is what worship does for all of us. It reminds us that there is more to life than just going to work or school, that there is a dimension of the holy that is inside us. Bryant Kirkland, for many years the minister of the Fifth Avenue Church in New York City, said on a number of occasions that he did not know how a person could live in New York and not worship.

## III.

Then, too, worship is an experience that reminds us of the moral dimension of life. Psalm 96 reminds us that the God we worship is a God who “will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth.” In the world in which we live it is very easy for a person to live without any real sense of conscience. After all, there are plenty of people who live, worse lives than we live. There is much darkness in the world that overwhelms the gray shades of our compromises and surrenders.

But when we come to worship, we face something else. We are confronted with the fact the God we worship is a God of holiness. He is the God who commands us in Christ to “be perfect as God is perfect.” That is one of the reasons that in our worship service we include a general prayer of confession. In the presence of the light of God’s holiness we are deeply aware of the darkness of our own sin. That is a humbling experience without which there is not spiritual health.

Now, let us be clear about one thing. Worship is not the guarantee of a moral life. In fact worship can be and often is misused as a substitute for righteousness, as though God could be placated by pious observances and flattering praise.

That is why alongside those passages in the Bible in which worship is exalted, we should also place those passages where worship is condemned: Isaiah, crying against his

people's ritual observances amidst their cruel social injustices, and saying in the name of God, "Who has required this at your hand, to trample my courts?" Micah, observing the appalling worship of his own time, saying in contrast, "What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?" Jesus saying, "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23).

So let us not deceive ourselves. God is not mocked by empty hymns, anthems, and prayers. Worship that is not rooted in the everyday life of honesty, service, and integrity is false worship.

But let us not underestimate the power of worship. When a man like Isaiah goes into the temple and sees the Lord there high and lifted up, finding a loyalty that transcends all others, so that he can say, "Here am I. Send me!" Or when a woman like Harriet Beecher Stowe worships in a church in Maine and during the service is inspired to write a book that helped to bring an end to slavery, we know the importance of worship.

That does not mean that all worship is inspiring. Some of it is not. But worship does not so much depend on us as it does God. Wilfred Grenfell once attended a worship service where the preacher was the famous evangelist Dwight L. Moody. It could not have been a very dignified worship service. At one point one of the ministers prayed for forty-five minutes until finally Dr. Moody had to stand up and say, "While this brother is finishing his prayer, please turn to hymn number #140." But something in that service touched Wilfred Grenfell and he became one of the most effective missionaries of the Twentieth Century.

#### IV.

The crux of the matter is that worship, at its heart is an experience that allows each of us to rededicate our lives and to release the power of God to work in and through us. There are two aspects of life that are to be held in tension--work and worship--what we do to ourselves, and what we let God do for us; what we actively labor at, and what we are receptively enriched by. This is the boat of human life and it is rowed with two oars--work and worship. The trouble with many of us is that we are rowing with one oar. We are going around in circles and we are getting nowhere.

Many of us, in our business and professional lives, grow great by the things we master. We have learned to master economic theory, or the nuances of law, or the intricacies of science. But in the life of the spirit we grow great not by the things we control, but by the things that control us.

Shortly before his death two years ago Dr. John Leith commented to me that at the end of his life he believed that the most serious problems facing our society are not economic or social or political, but theological. The great question that each person must

**answer if they are to grow to human maturity is the question, “Why am I here.” The most serious issue in our society is not economic or social or political, but the question of death and the end of history. Does human life have meaning, or is it simply a senseless, meaningless episode in the history of the universe that will end in ruin without purpose or meaning? The second most important question is the question of guilt and salvation. Is there some power in the world that enables each of us as a human being to overcome the dominance of instinct and impulse and the corruption of instinct and impulse by our own self-interests?**

**The church is involved in many incidental activities in which other institutions and communities in our society are also involved, and sometimes do much better than the church. The one service that the church can offer the world that no one else can offer is the witness to what God has done for our salvation, in our creation, and in particular in the coming of Jesus Christ by whose life, death and resurrection God has given hope to every human being who believes.**

**That is at the heart of our worship and that is what we celebrate today.**

**Amen!**