

“The Centrality of Worship”

a sermon by

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Text: “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’” (Isaiah 6:8).

This past week I came across an interesting poll that was taken of ministers and other leaders in the church. When asked the most controversial issue facing the church, the answer was not homosexuality, abortion, or even the war in Iraq. The answer was, of all things, worship.

For a number of years the so-called “worship wars” have plagued many churches. In most cases, the controversy centers on traditional worship verses contemporary, and even more importantly, the role of contemporary forms of music in the church’s life.

These wars are not new. As Quentin Faulkner has pointed out in an article in “The American Organist,” questions and quarrels about worship and music have been with the church for centuries. As new forms of music became available, the church over the years has adapted its worship. For many years Presbyterian congregations sang only hymns based on the Book of Psalms. The introduction of the pipe organ in the 19th Century was one of the most hotly debated issues that the churches faced.

I.

One of the reasons that worship evokes such passion in so many people is the fact that most of us intrinsically understand that worship is central to the life of faith. When the Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) speaks of the “Great Ends of the Church,” the first is the “proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind.”

Not surprisingly, the Bible has a great deal to say about worship. A great deal of it is quite positive. The New Testament tells us that Jesus himself went to the synagogue as his custom was, on the Sabbath day. The Apostle Paul warns us: “Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together, as the custom of some is.”

There is, however, another word in the Old and New Testament that warns us against the abuse of worship. In the first chapter of the book of Isaiah, the prophet hears God indignantly saying to the crowd that gathered for worship, “Who has required this at your hand to trample my courts?” Furthermore, Isaiah hears God saying, “When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you. Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen.”

Jesus himself pictured a Pharisee going up to the Temple to pray. What could be wrong with that—a person going to the church to pray? Jesus heard the man praying, “Lord, I thank you that I am not like other men.” One of the most sarcastic things that Jesus said was directed to the kind of people who loved to “stand and pray in the synagogue, where they were seen by others.”

Often, we hear today of the decline of the churches in this country, but there is another fact that is often overlooked. Worship is still at the very heart of who we are as a people. Every weekend in this country more people gather for worship on any given weekend than all of the other activities combined—football games, soccer games, baseball games—you name it. More people in this country participate in worship than in all of the other athletic events combined.

So, what is it that draws us to worship?

II.

In the first place, when we worship we are reminded of the values that the world makes us forget. That is where we derive the meaning of worship. It means according worth to something. Worship always calls us to appreciate the things in life that are really of value.

That is particularly important in the kind of world we live in where the values of our society are often so questionable. I thought of this during the past week, when I read in the paper that the C.E.O. of Merrill Lynch had lost his job because of the terrible performance of his company. As I read on, I saw that his severance package was 161 million dollars. I thought to myself, if you can get that kind of money for mismanaging a company, I wonder what they would pay someone who was actually successful.

The Psalmist once cried out, “My soul longs, yes faints for the courts of the Lord.” All of us desperately need to be brought face to face with the Most High and be reminded of the things of real worth that this world makes us forget.

This summer, when I was visiting in Boston, I took an afternoon to go out to Cambridge. I had never been on the campus of Harvard University and I was curious to see what it was like. I was particularly drawn to the Memorial Church that sits there near the center of the campus. Peter Gomes, who is the Dean of the Chapel, commented recently that once one of the deans at Harvard had come to visit him at his office in the chapel. As this dean looked out at Harvard Square, he said to Peter Gomes, “Peter, you know if we were building this university today, we would never put a church in the center of the University.” Gomes, not one to suffer fools lightly, replied, “Well, it’s here. And it is not going anywhere, so get used to it.”

One of the famous preachers at Harvard was Dr. George Buttrick. I first heard George Buttrick preach when I was a student at Davidson College. In those days, the students had

required Vespers on Sunday evening and required chapel three mornings a week. Of course, the students hated this and most of us spent a lot of time reading newspapers and trying to sleep. I remember one day when Dr. Buttrick spoke at chapel. He spoke of some of the existentialist writers of that period including Albert Camus and Franz Kafka. What I remember most is that I was riveted to what he was saying. I had never really heard anyone speak with that eloquence and authority and I remember to this day what he said.

Over the years, I have thought about a generation of individuals who had a great vision of what the church could mean to a college or University and I am grateful for men like James B. Duke who built the chapel at Duke University and for John R. Cunningham who built the Davidson College Presbyterian Church and I hope that one day the church will recover some of these giants who had a vision and faith that is sadly lacking today.

III.

There is something else that worship does for us. It can call us to a new standard of ethical living for our lives. Worship at its best calls us to a new standard of righteousness and to a new vision of serving God. In the text that we read this morning the prophet Isaiah was worshipping in the Temple of Jerusalem when something powerful happened to him. Suddenly, he was in the presence of God. He heard a voice saying, “Who will go with us and whom shall we send?” He replied, “Here am I, send me.”

Let us never underestimate the power of worship to transform lives. Harriet Beecher Stowe worshipped God one day in a small church in Augusta, Maine. During the course of the worship she received a revelation from God to write a book on the evils of slavery. The name of that book was *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and it had a powerful effect on bringing an end to slavery in this nation.

Worship can have that effect on a person. Worship, properly conducted, has the power to produce lives that are renewed, sustained, and dedicated to God and humankind.

One of the most famous missionaries of the 20th Century was a physician by the name of Sir Wilfred Grenfell. For many years he served as a medical missionary to Greenland, bringing healing to thousands of people who had never before seen a doctor.

The transformation in Grenfell’s life that led him to this service took place in a church in Chicago, Illinois. The minister of that church was a famous evangelist, Dwight L. Moody. On that particular day, Dr. Moody conducted the worship service. It could not have been a very dignified affair, for during the worship service Moody asked one of the other ministers to pray, and he did—for forty-five minutes. He prayed on and on until finally, Moody interrupted him and said, “While the brother here is finishing his prayer, let us sing hymn # 161.” No, it could not have been the preaching that day, nor was it the glorious architecture in Moody’s tabernacle that moved Wilfred Grenfell. He found something else. His worse self was confronted by his best self, and his better self was confronted by Christ so that he went out a transformed, redirected person to make his life count for the Kingdom of God. That is worship at its best.

IV.

Worship can do something else. It is an experience that can enable a person to rededicate his or her life in such a way that releases great energy and power.

Someone once observed that there are two aspects in every life. There is work and there is worship. Work is what we do. Worship is what is done for us. Work is what we are aggressive about. Worship is what we are hospitable toward. It is as if the boat of life is rowed by two oars--work and worship.

The trouble with most of us is that we are rowing with one oar. We are going around in circles and consequently, we are getting nowhere.

All of us, I think, are intrinsically aware of this. There are some things that we have to do. There are other things that have to be done for us. Certainly, that is the great value of art and music. As we worship in this church we are surrounded by beauty in many forms--chandeliers, stained glass, and an architectural witness that points us beyond ourselves.

The same is true with great music. It has the power to comfort, inspire, and to challenge us. Karl Barth, the great theologian, once spoke about the value of music and art to his own work. In his study at Basle was a print of Matthias Grunewald's great painting "The Crucifixion." At the forefront of the painting is the figure of John the Baptism pointing to Christ on the cross. For Barth, that was the function of the preacher and theologian, pointing people to Christ.

Barth also paid tribute to the music of W. A. Mozart. He began each day by listening to Mozart's music and concluded each day in the same fashion. Barth once said that he believed that the angels in heaven sing the music of J. S. Bach but when they return home, they listen to Mozart.

All of us need to find those things in life which lift our spirit and point us to our creator. For Isaiah, it was the temple in Jerusalem. For Jesus, it was also the temple, but the Galilean hillsides as well.

The person who knows only work is a slave. But the person who knows worship finds inspiration, emancipation, and release.

May God give us of us the gift of reverence that we may adore the things that should be adored. Direct our lives toward those things which alone are worth living for.

Amen!