

Practicing Your Faith: Worship Every Chance You Get
Psalm 100, Romans 12:1-8
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Rev. Katherine C. Kerr
First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte

Bill Wood, a former pastor of this church, once told a story that tickled me and has stuck with me. A man was leaving the sanctuary after worship and as he slowed to shake the preacher's hand, he couldn't resist sharing his dislike for the last hymn they had sung that morning. Without missing a beat, the preacher replied, "That's okay, we weren't singing to you!"

As much as I understand and can appreciate the feeling behind the man's complaint- I have some strong opinions on hymns, after all- I just love the preacher's response. In a world in which just about everything is expected to be custom-fit and tailor-made to each individual's preference, worship is a rare time in our week when we have the chance to surrender at least a little bit of control. Sure, we might choose a church based on its worship style, or whether we like the preacher. We might have clear ideas about how things are done or what the space should look or feel like- or about the musical selections.

But regardless of our personal preferences, no matter how we slice it, we can't avoid the fact that worship just isn't about us, about what we like or dislike. We are here to worship God and God alone, not ourselves, not our neighbors, not the preacher or the choir or even the Bible. For at least one blessed hour a week, we get to drag our focus away from ourselves and put it where it rightly ought to be- on God.

And so that inevitably means that sometimes we will be uncomfortable and sometimes we won't like what is going on. But it doesn't mean we should stop doing it.

Psalm 100, which Katelyn read a little bit ago, is my favorite call to worship. It calls "all the earth" to "worship the Lord with gladness," giving thanks and praise for God's steadfast love and faithfulness. There is no

equivocating here- the message is clear. All that has been created belongs to God and should therefore respond with thanks and praise.

Worship is foundational to our lives as Christians, and that is why we are starting with it in our Lenten examination of practices of faith. During these six weeks leading up to Easter, we are going to be looking at and thinking about what it means to live out our faith, and specifically thinking about some concrete things that we can do that help us in our quest to be disciples of Christ. We will examine everything from mindfulness to small group fellowship, knowing our own gifts and sharing them through service. We will do this with an eye toward each member making a commitment to use their time and energy in one of the ministry teams of this church- the ways in which we are organized to be about the work to which we are called.

But we start here because worship is the central spiritual practice of our faith. It is our natural response to God, and how we come to know who we are and what we are to do. It is where we begin, where we are refreshed and equipped along the way, and it is where we will be at the end of our days.

In my bible, this morning's passage from Romans appears under the heading, "the new life in Christ." In the first eleven chapters of this book, Paul gives an account of the breadth of God's power in redeeming creation, which has gone so badly astray. Beginning with chapter 12, Paul seeks to answer the "so what?" that all humans seem to need. Okay, so you've told us what God has done in creating and redeeming humankind. Now what do we do with it?

Paul's answer is clear. In response to the sacrifice God made for us in Jesus Christ, we should give our whole selves over to God in worship. Instead of living as the world expects us to live- selfishly and for our own pleasure, we are called to live as God would have us to live- humbly and with our eyes and hearts attuned to God and to those around us.

And to Paul, and most anyone else who has studied scripture and the Christian life, the first and best way to do this is through worship.

By its definition, worship means to revere or admire someone or something. It has a secular connotation- people can worship any number of people or things. But for people of faith, the sole object of worship is God.

The Reformed theologian and worship scholar Hughes Old describes it this way:

“We worship God because God created us to worship him. Worship is at the center of our existence, at the heart of our reason for being. . . Through the ministry of praise and prayer, the ministry of word and sacrament, we are transformed to offer that spiritual worship that the apostle Paul tells us is acceptable to God. This is what we mean when we say that worship is the work of the Holy Spirit in the body of Christ to the glory of the Father.”¹

In our context as a community of faith, we acknowledge that we are all perfectly capable of revering and admiring God on our own, but that we are called to do so together, in corporate worship. Coming together on a regular basis to hear God’s word and sing God’s praise, confess our sin and profess our belief is our primary way of responding to God’s amazing gifts of life and salvation. The combination of tradition, structure, accountability and support provided by our communal act of worship is central to each individual’s journey of faith.

The “spiritual worship” of which Paul speaks follows a cyclical pattern for those who seek to practice it. Our awareness of God’s extraordinary grace pushes us into worship to give thanks and praise. Our experience in worship then pushes us into the world to serve God. What we see and experience out there- the good and the bad, causes us to come here to thank God, to be strengthened and renewed. What we see and experience here causes us to live differently- to see the world through the eyes of God, transformed by our worship to live lives worthy of God’s calling.

So this hour or so every week becomes so much more than just an hour when we allow worship to be transformative. As we practice turning to God

¹ Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship: Reformed According to Scripture*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), pp.1 &6.

with gratitude and praise, the Spirit works in our lives to make more and more of what we do outside of this space into acts of worship, and to deepen our experience of worship, no matter what we might face.

I have come to understand worship in a new way since my mother's death. Over the course of my life, I have received some amazing things from my mom- brown eyes and the best chocolate chip cookies I've ever tasted. A love for language and a bit of an obsession with proper grammar. Deep love and high expectations. Strong opinions and a tendency not to suffer fools. But without a doubt the greatest gift my mother ever gave me was a rock solid foundation of faith, built upon the cornerstone of regular corporate worship.

When I was growing up, there were no debates in my house about what we would do on Sunday morning. We went to church, no questions asked. One of my most abiding childhood memories is lying in bed on Sunday morning, half awake, half asleep, listening to my parents getting ready for church, wondering how long I could get away with staying in bed. My mom would go downstairs and have her coffee and breakfast, do a few things, and then she would sit down at the piano and play a few of her favorites- some hymns, and always Fur Elise. I soon realized that as soon as she began Fur Elise, I needed to be up and getting ready. We never talked about it- it was an unspoken, but very clear, message. I've been patient up to this point, but it is time to get up and get ready. We are going to church.

I didn't always like it. Sometimes I hated it. But I always went.

In the act of going to church together as a family, Sunday after Sunday, we grew together. I learned more theology than I thought by hearing sermons and singing hymns. I practiced sitting still and began to see that not everything was meant for my entertainment. I watched my father share the gift of his beautiful bass voice in the choir and stood alongside my mother as she sang every word of every hymn, even though her singing voice was, I'll just say, not exactly choir-worthy. I witnessed a community caring for one another- celebrating the good and grieving the sad together. And I understood that what we were doing was important.

As I entered adulthood, and in the process of becoming a pastor and planning and leading worship myself, I knew all of that somewhere deep down inside, but it took my mother's death to make me truly grasp the profundity of the gift she had given me.

Mom died on December 22 in Jacksonville, Florida. Two days later, it was Christmas Eve. And my family went to church. As we walked in, my parents' pastor smiled. He gave my dad a big hug. As he turned to me, he had a little twinkle in his eye and he said, "this is an act of defiance."

As I reflected upon Paul's words in this morning's passage, I couldn't help but think that showing up to worship God on one of the most joyful nights of the Christian year, just two days after one of the saddest days of all of our lives, was indeed an act of defiance. It was a refusal to be conformed to a world that says that death is the end, that sorrow and sadness win. It was an acknowledgement that even in sorrow, God is to be praised. It was an affirmation that, no matter what we face in our lives, God is good. God is faithful. God is there.

As I sat in that sanctuary, where I had been confirmed, where I had sat through my teenage years alongside my mom, where I had preached my first sermon, where Bill and I were married, tears streamed down my face. I missed my mom. I felt her presence in that place, in the familiar music and the rituals of worship, and the magnitude of my loss seemed almost overwhelming.

But in the midst of my profound sorrow, I realized that I was also feeling profound gratitude, and profound comfort. I knew that we were going to be okay. My mom had made sure that worship was an integral part of our family's life and at the moment we needed it most, it comforted us and gave us peace. In the seemingly simple, comfortingly familiar acts of looking up in a sanctuary, hearing words of scripture, singing hymns of praise and bowing my head in prayer, I felt something of the heaviness I had carried for so many months begin to lift. The grief wasn't gone- it isn't today either, and it won't ever be completely gone. But it was soothed a bit, and I was grateful for that.

I started this sermon by making the point that worship isn't about us, and I'm not going back on that. It isn't about us. It doesn't exist to make us better about ourselves or our lives.

It exists because of God. As theologian Marva Dawn writes, "the entire reason for our worship is that God deserves it. Moreover, it isn't even useful for earning points with God, for what we do in worship won't change one whit how God feels about us."²

But when the regular practice of worship is a part of our lives, when we commit to stopping weekly to give ourselves over to God in corporate worship, we find that it does change us. It weaves itself into the very fabric of who we are, so that when we are joyful, we sing praise to the Lord, and when we are sad, we pour out our troubles at God's feet. Surrendering ourselves to God's sovereignty even just an hour a week transforms us, helping us to see that God is with us in the good times and the bad, that God is greater than we can ever imagine, nearer than we will ever perceive, and worthy of all of our praise.

So make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness, come into his presence with singing.

Worship every chance you get.

Amen.

² Marva Dawn, *A Royal "Waste" of Time*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), p.1.