

Passionate Worship: Loving God
Isaiah 6:1-8, John 15:1-5
September 21, 2008

A group of 9 and 10 year olds attended worship one Sunday morning and then each wrote a letter to the minister reflecting on the experience. Here are a few samples of their letters:

Dear Reverend, I liked your sermon Sunday. Especially when it was finished. --Ralph, 10.

Dear Reverend, I like to go to church on Sunday because I don't have any choice. -- Margaret, 10.

Dear Reverend, Thank you for your sermon Sunday. I will write more when my mother explains to me what you said. --Justin, 9

Dear Reverend, I think more people would come to church if you would move it to Disneyland. --Loreen, 9

We can usually count on children to be honest!

Why do we come to worship? As of a certain age, we are no longer forced to come. What is it that draws us to a sacred place? Some come out of habit; it is the way we were raised and has become a significant part of our lives. Some come for the fellowship with friends we have made in the congregation. Many come for spiritual sustenance, for nourishment to feed our spirits.

Beyond what draws us here, why do we worship? What is the purpose of worship? Jesus stated it succinctly when he pointed out the two most important commandments: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Worship is an expression of our love for God and love for our neighbor. The purpose of worship is loving God.

The word "worship" originated from words meaning worthiness, respect, reverence. Worship is acknowledging that God alone is of ultimate worth as the source and goal of human life. Worship is a gift of respect to the God whom we love.

Worship is about God; it's not about us. In our culture there is a notion that worship should be entertaining. The people come to be pumped up and enthused about all the good things God is doing for them.

Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard saw that worship in his day came to resemble a theatrical performance. It seemed that the setting and activity of worship had taken on the form and attitude of the theater. The congregation was the audience; the priest, musicians, and other worshipers were the performers; and, at best, the role of God and the Holy Spirit was that of prompter. The focus of worship was on the actions and words of those up front; the purpose of worship seemed to be to engage and entertain the audience.

Kierkegaard offered a different perspective. He said that the audience for worship is not the congregation but God. God is the one to whom our worship is directed. It is not for our own entertainment. Participants are shaped, formed, and built up through worship, but those benefits are byproducts of an authentic worship of God. If God is the audience, then who are the actors? The actors are all the worshipers whose songs and prayers are offered for the audience of the Holy One.¹

The role of the priest, the preacher, the musicians, and other worship leaders becomes that of prompter. We exist to aid the gathered Body of Christ in performing the act of worship for God. Worship isn't about us; it's about God. The choir rehearses its anthems; the organist

rehearses his music; the preacher prepares a sermon; the liturgist studies the scripture so that we can offer our best to God. Daily God offers us God's best. In turn we want to offer our very best to God.

Why do we worship? We worship as an expression of our love for God. We aren't the audience; we are the actors, participating in the prayers, songs, and proclamation of the scriptures as a sign of respect for God. The word liturgy, referring to the various elements of the worship service, means "the work of the people." The activities we engage in during worship are the work the people offer in response to God's gifts to us.

Hopefully the byproduct of worship is that in offering our work to God, our love for God deepens. We long to respond to God through daily acts of reverence for God and the creation. We are moved to look upon our neighbors with greater compassion because of our love for God. Worship need not be confined to a service of the gathered community; we can worship daily as we express gratitude for the beauty of changing seasons; as we pray for those who are in need; as we sing songs of praise while listening to recorded music. The glow of worship spreads out into our everyday lives: our greeting of the grumpy clerk at the store; our response to the neighbor who needs assistance; our courtesy when driving on the roadway! The experience of worship grounds us in godly ways of living.

"The late historian of religions Mircea Eliade claimed that all ancient religions cherish some kind of *axis mundi* or axle around which the world revolves....Joseph Campbell referred to the axial tree that can be found in all of the Native American religions. This tree is the axial center of the four corners of the earth and the mystical place where the world is held together. All religious people have cherished some sacred symbol that nurtures their hope that they are not abandoned to the anomie and chaos of life. This is what we Christians are looking for when we gather on Sunday morning beneath a cross – our axial tree."ⁱⁱ

Our nation is experiencing an economic crisis. Our state is in the midst of a budget crisis and those in need of social services have been suffering. Communities in the Gulf Coast have been devastated by hurricanes and it will take years for them to recover. Civilians and soldiers are losing lives and limbs in Iraq and Afghanistan. Government officials around the world are found to be less than scrupulous. We all go through seasons of personal crisis. In the midst of the chaos that swirls around us, it is vital to gather around a sacred center in order to maintain grounding and security.

In loving God we are reminded that we are part of a larger story, not simply our own little worlds. We are part of the story of God's people in which God has played an active role for millennia. Humans have endured crises of various kinds throughout history. While they have not been without great suffering, God has worked within circumstances to bring blessing, to cultivate resilience, and offer resurrection. God does not abandon us to the chaos of life. God loves us and desires God's best for us. In our worship of God we are reminded of this promise and of God's faithfulness.

Why do we worship? Worship is an expression of our love for God. A byproduct of worship is a deepening of our love for God and neighbor and a grounding in faith that sustains and guides us through life.

A major issue in church life in recent decades has been the question, "How shall we worship?"

A young rabbi found a serious problem in his new congregation. During the Friday service, half the congregation stood for the prayers and half remained seated, and each side

shouted at the other, insisting that their was the true tradition. Nothing the rabbi said or did moved toward solving the impasse. Finally in desperation the young rabbi sought out the synagogue's 99-year old founder. He met the old rabbi in the nursing home and poured out his troubles. "So tell me," he pleaded, "was it the tradition for the congregation to stand during the prayers?"

"No," answered the old rabbi.

"Ah," responded the younger man, "then it was the tradition to sit during the prayers?"

"No," answered the old rabbi.

"Well," the young rabbi responded, "what we have is complete chaos! Half the people stand and shout, and the other half sit and scream."

"Ah," said the old man, "THAT was the tradition."

The repertoire of sacred music has expanded exponentially to include not only traditional 18th century hymns and classical works of art. Now available for our worship are contemporary Christian bands; chants of the Taize community in France and the Iona community in Scotland; global praise music from Christians around the world; fresh words for familiar tunes.

As you greeted one another this morning, I asked you to share one of your favorite worship songs. I hope you remember what you heard from others. It may be something different than what is meaningful to you. In a community and indeed a state and nation of great diversity, it is important that we be mindful that people are moved to respond to God in a variety of different ways. Our opening song, "God of Many Names," points to the truth that we have differing images of God. Our congregation is not of a size yet to offer alternative styles of worship and so in our services we seek to incorporate a variety of elements in order to assist the multitude in offering their love to God.

A great hymnist of the church Erik Routley once said, "Hymns are like people; they have personality and character. Congregations who sing only one kind of hymn like only one kind of person in their congregation. If they respond to new hymns with, 'Why do we have to sing hymns like that?' don't be surprised if they aren't more open to having new people attend their church as well."ⁱⁱⁱ

Howard Gardener introduced us to the multiple intelligence theory. It helps us to understand that people learn and grow in different ways. Certain experiences will resonate with some that are meaningless to others. This applies not only to education but also to worship. Some are moved by the words of scripture or a sermon. Others are inspired by the music. Logical thinkers seek a common theme woven throughout the service. Visual learners like to see images, photos, and symbols. Bodily-Kinesthetic folks prefer action, including drama and the act of receiving communion. Some prefer quiet moments of silence. Others prefer engaging with one another during worship.^{iv} This means that not all elements of a service will speak to everyone. It's okay to stay with what assists you in loving God, while respecting that others love God in different ways.

And God delights in it all!! Every child is different, but loved just the same! Parents recognize the differences in their children's temperaments, personalities, interests, and talents, and yet they love them all. Remembering that our worship is about loving God and giving God our best, we can stretch to allow others to express their love in a way that isn't as meaningful to us.

Undergirding the specifics of the service is a fourfold pattern of worship. We gather as the people of God. We proclaim the word of God, listening to the scriptures and hearing it interpreted for our time and place. We respond to the word of God with our prayers of

intercession and our offerings of various kinds. We are sent forth into the world to take the good news of God's love to others. This pattern is like a drama or a dance that gives us a structure while allowing for our unique and creative expressions of love.

We return to this pattern on a regular basis because it is an oasis for us in the midst of the chaos of life. Here we are reminded of God's great love and of that larger story of God's enduring faithfulness throughout human history. We are assured that God is with us, just as God has been with our ancestors in the faith. We respond to that assurance by offering our best gifts to God. Those gifts come in various forms.

All of it is a way of loving God and God delights in it all!!

ⁱ Rob Weber with Stacy Hood,, *Reconnecting Worship: Where Tradition and Innovation Converge* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), p. 33.

ⁱⁱ M. Craig Barnes, "Homestretch," *The Christian Century*, September 20, 2003, p. 9.

ⁱⁱⁱ "In unison," *The Christian Century*, July 12, 2003, p. 5.

^{iv} Marcia McFee, *The Worship Workshop* (Peace by Peace Productions, 2000), pp. 24-25.

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