

# **Sermon Series: “Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations”**

## **II. The Practice of Passionate Worship**

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

January 21, 2018

We continue our six-week sermon series begun last week. The series is based on ideas from a book by Robert Schnase, a Methodist Pastor and Bishop. He proposes that vitality and fruitful ministries in congregations are based on five specific practices implemented in a consistent fashion. An interim period like the one here at Unity Presbyterian is an ideal time for a congregation to examine ways it can become more vital as a community of faith, and more fruitful in its ministry as servants of God to the world.

Last week we looked at the first of those practices: radical hospitality. This week we examine passionate worship.

For those with any familiarity with the Presbyterian Church, the words “passionate” and “worship” are not typically used in the same sentence. Words most likely paired with “worship” might be “well-ordered,” “intellectual,” “controlled,” “unemotional,” at times even “detached.” But not “passionate.” “Passionate” is a word to be paired with college football or basketball. Putting together the words “worship” and “passionate” likely would 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, passion approaches too closely 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 to far.

Our scripture texts for today do not provide a definition of worship as much as they provide nuances to the character of worship. So before going to those texts, let’s get some sense of worship’s definition. That seems like a proper intellectual approach for 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. This encounter with God typically mediated experiences of fear and awe, and a sense of insignificance and unworthiness in the presence of the Supreme Being. Faced with such a strange and unfathomable experience, human response was offered only with reticence if given at all. The proper human response to God was silence, obedience to any divine mandate, and words of honor and praise to mark the occasion. It sounds like traditional Presbyterian worship!

Eventually worship evolved into other, equally faithful although different, responses to God. One of those forms of worship became known as “Lament.”

We may not recognize that designation of “Lament” but we probably are familiar with the concept. Lament includes “arguing with God”! Did you know that arguing with God is an aspect of faithful worship? According to the Bible it is!

“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 can be seen in many of the Psalms. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” “Lament” as a legitimate expression of faith, demonstrates a more approachable and less dreadful relationship with the divine in the vicissitudes of life.

Worship began as a personal encounter with God and later grew into a community response to God. From the personal encounters with God by the patriarchs and matriarchs of the Jewish faith, the focus of worship shifts to the community, particularly seen in the Exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt, and later the re-emergence of the remnant of Judah from exile. At every point along the line, the community bears witness and responds to the great God of deliverance from oppression to freedom.

When Moses stood before Pharaoh and demanded “Let my people go!” that freedom was for the purpose of worshipping God. Biblical freedom has always been rooted, not merely in freedom from oppression but freedom to worship the true God whose values include the value and dignity of all creation. Great movements throughout history are founded

on such a 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 embracing God's word the Torah.

The Christian church followed the Jewish pattern of 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 the personal and the community engagement with God. He participated in the local synagogue and he gathered with others at the Temple. He proclaimed the coming of God's realm open to all. Jesus modeled an intimate relationship with God, using the language of a son with his father.

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. Both come to worship with others, both have a personal experience in worship.

What is different is the outcome of worship. Worship can lead to wholeness or it can lead to destructiveness. The arrogant Pharisee left worship self-justified, unchanged and untouched by God. The humble 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 is worship where a person shifts toward the good through honest self-assessment and humility. The end result is we discover that before God we all stand on equal ground. Equally sinful, equally forgiven, equally redeemed, equally valued, equally children of the Almighty.

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. That is because he believes something is at stake in worship.

In worship, something is at stake, something matters which won't be found anywhere else, and something happens within people of faith that won't happen any other place. And the "something that matters" is available to all, not to a lucky few. It is not the exclusive territory of the religiously arrogant and self-righteous.

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 arrogance.

Psalm 73 is a psalm of perspective, of gaining 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 orient us. 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. Worship engages us personally and places us in the center of a community with God.

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. How many did you pass on the way here today? And alternatives exist to going to worship. People can go golfing or out to the lake or read 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).

What is at stake for you, for your family, for your community that brings you to worship? And when you get here, 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 or what is shaping our vision and 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 we must question if it provides any ultimate significance for us and our world.

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, welcome the lonely, heal the sick, comfort the broken and lost. I hope we are here to be pressed into service for the redemption of the world.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.” Maybe worship provided King the perspective to see things differently, to dream a dream where boys and girls of every color and race could play and learn and thrive together. Maybe he could sense its possibilities in the prophets’ call for justice and in Jesus’ beloved community.

What matters to you? The education of children? The vulnerability of the impoverished? The pursuit of peace? The dignity of each person in opportunity and self-determination?

Passionate worship moves us beyond ourselves. It focuses on a vision that God has for the world, a vision of inclusion and wholeness. It directs God’s people to specific action in the world.

What is at stake in our worship at Unity?

Mark E. Diehl  
Unity Presbyterian Church  
Fort Mill, SC