

Formed by Worship

Psalm 122

Good Morning Friends, it's wonderful to see you all this morning. Of course, welcome to those of you who are joining us online today.

We're continuing through our series on Christian Discipleship, and the practices of faith that shape us more and more into the likeness of Jesus. Discipleship is a slow pursuit, the patient acquisition of holiness, as Eugene Peterson would say. Last week, we talked about how reading scripture, grounding ourselves in the Big Story of God's pursuit of humanity, helps form us. This morning, we're going to talk about worship.

When I speak about worship this morning, I'm essentially talking about what we do here on Sunday morning. Praying. Singing. Reading Scripture. Sharing of joys and concerns. Telling the Story of God in our lives and in our context. Worship is a very big word, and indeed Scripture tells us that our whole lives, everything that we are and do, is an act of worship to God. Yes, worship is MUCH MUCH BIGGER than what we do here, but for the purposes of this message, I'm talking about coming together as followers of Jesus and singing, praying, praising and speaking to God and about God.

Much of my inspiration for this series comes from this book, "A Long Obedience in the Same Direction", by Eugene Peterson. In the opening of the chapter on worship, Peterson, who was a pastor of churches for decades, tells this story: "One of the

afflictions of the pastoral work has been to listen, with a straight face, to all the reasons people give for not going to church: “My mother made me when I was little.” “There are too many hypocrites in the church.” “It’s the only day I have to sleep in.” There was a time when I responded to such statements with simple arguments that exposed them as flimsy excuses. Then I noticed that it didn’t make any difference. If I showed the inadequacy of one excuse, three more would pop up in its place. So I don’t respond anymore. I listen (with a straight face) and go home and pray that person will one day find the one sufficient reason for going to church, which is God. I go about my work hoping that what I do and say will be usable by the Holy Spirit to create in that person a determination to worship God in Christian Community. Many people do: they decide to worship God, faithfully and devoutly. It is one of the important acts in a life of discipleship. And what is far more interesting that the reasons (excuses) give for not going to worship is discovering the reasons that they do.”

I think that’s such a great question - what are the reasons why we worship? Why do we roll ourselves out of a bed on a Sunday morning to be here? How does worship shape us and form us? I’m sure the answers are as varied as the people in this room. I’d love to hear some of those reasons, if anyone feels so inclined to share that with me.

Throughout scripture, God makes it clear that as his people he wants us to worship, there should be a place where we come together as a collective to turn our fullest selves towards praising and adoring God. When the children of Israel were in the wilderness for 40 years, there was the Tabernacle. A big tent that was taken down and

set up again and again the meeting place between God and Israel. This was where they brought sacrifices to God, where acts of praise and worship took place.

God is worthy of praise. Scripture is full of admonitions for God's people to offer him praise, to remember that the lord is good and God is at work in our midst. Psalm 96:1-6 says, "Sing a new song to the LORD!

Let the whole earth sing to the LORD!

Sing to the LORD; praise his name.

Each day proclaim the good news that he saves.

Publish his glorious deeds among the nations.

Tell everyone about the amazing things he does.

Great is the LORD! He is most worthy of praise!

He is to be feared above all gods.

The gods of other nations are mere idols,

but the LORD made the heavens!

Honor and majesty surround him;

strength and beauty fill his sanctuary."

Praising God is the natural response to receiving God's grace in our lives. For my preaching course, I read a book "They like to never quit praisin' God" by Thomas Frank. It's a study of the African-American Style of Celebratory Preaching. If you've ever seen or been to an African American church service, you'll know that the services are often

loud and participatory, with lots of Amen-ing and Yes Lord-ing. What I didn't know until I read this book is that in the African American tradition, the sermon always ends with a celebration of God's Grace. It always ends on the Good News of God's Grace which opens up this opportunity for celebratory praise. In this style of preaching, the only logical response for the congregation is this loud, raucous, glorious praising of God! God's good news, God's grace, moves us to praise together- because God is worthy of that praise. Worship is a response to God - we are the recipients of God's love and grace, and we express that thanks through worship, through what we do here on Sunday morning.

Of course, sometimes, we don't feel that way. I sometimes don't feel like I have anything to offer, I don't feel deep down a sense of God's love and grace, and so expressing thanks in worship can feel disingenuous, like I'm faking it. But that's one of the beautiful things about worshiping in a community. I may not be feeling it, but Marg shares a story about something God has done and I think I can praise God with Marg. Or Carrol, in her worship leading, might read a Psalm or a prayer that says something true about God, and I think that's something I can praise God for. Worshiping in a collective, in a group of people and with ears turned to the stories of our Faith Mothers and Fathers in the Bible, offers us so many reasons to respond to God that have nothing to do with ourselves. And that feels to me like good news.

Further, in this space of worship, we are reminded that God's Kingdom is breaking all around, that we live in a God soaked world. Worship trains us to see God in ordinary

places and faces and make up our everyday lives. This is a sacred mystery that happens in worship.

In our Voices Together hymnal is the song What is this place? (number 22) captures this idea really well in the first verse, “What is this place where we are meeting? Only a house, the earth, its floor, walls and a roof sheltering people, windows for light, and open door. Yet it becomes a body that lives when we are gathered here, and know that our God is near.”

Some of you probably know that Taylor is a photographer. (And a terribly good one in my opinion). Taylor bought his first pro camera when he was 19, and started to practice. He'd shoot anything that looked interesting. He'd review and edit the photos. Keep honing his craft. By doing this for sometime, Taylor developed an eye for photography. He'd see potential photographs everywhere. Through the lens of the camera, he'd notice things that most people would otherwise overlook, and soon, whether or not he had his camera with him, he'd see potential photographs everywhere.

Corporate worship is like that. The more we immerse ourselves in the worship-in a tuning ourselves to God's presence in this place, the more we'll see God's presence in our daily everyday life. At the end of 1 Corinthians chapter 13, we get a reminder that in loving one another and in worshiping together, we are getting a glimpse of God. The phrasing in the King James Version is really evocative, For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am

known. And now abide faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity." Our vision of God and God's kingdom is through a glass darkly, but corporate worship wipes it a bit clearer, takes some of the frost away.

Lastly, worshiping together reminds us that we're not alone in this journey of following Jesus. Discipleship, Jesus tells us, is a costly choice. Our choice to follow in God's ways and live as if the Kingdom of God has already come is not an easy one. In Luke 14:25-35, Jesus tells his followers this: Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, saying, 'This person began to build and wasn't able to finish.' "Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Won't he first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples. "Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; it is thrown out. "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."

That section has a lot of scary ideas in it-this passage honestly frightened me as a kid. I was afraid that I didn't love Jesus more than anything, and therefore I wasn't truly a Christian. And as alarming as these words are, the overarching point of Jesus' words here is that following Jesus is costly, and somewhere at some point in our lives, we will feel that cost. For our global sisters and brothers, that costliness is much more at the forefront of choosing to follow Jesus than it is here for us. But following Jesus is a hard road, and worship reminds us that we are not alone on that journey.

What happens in this space on Sunday mornings, I pray, helps us to get through the next 6 days. Sunday gatherings should be a place of encouragement- "We see that you're trying to live in God's ways, I am trying too, and God is faithful to all of us in that pursuit." We need to come together to be reminded that we have Jesus and one another to lean on when the cost of following Jesus feels too great, when the narrow road is squeezing in on us.

In Hebrews 10:19-25, the apostle Paul says this, "And so, dear brothers and sisters, we can boldly enter heaven's Most Holy Place because of the blood of Jesus. By his death, Jesus opened a new and life-giving way through the curtain into the Most Holy Place. And since we have a great High Priest who rules over God's house, let us go right into the presence of God with sincere hearts fully trusting him. For our guilty consciences have been sprinkled with Christ's blood to make us clean, and our bodies have been washed with pure water. Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God can be trusted to keep his promise. Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some

people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.”

Paul is proclaiming this Good news that we now have direct access to our great and compassionate High Priest Jesus Christ. We can enter boldly into that space for worship and want, of praise and supplication. But what I think is most interesting is the way that Paul presents this as good news for the collective, this is good news for all of us, and Paul marries this good news about Jesus coming near to us with a call to be together in the community of faith. “Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God can be trusted to keep his promise. Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.” We need each other to follow Jesus well. We need to worship together in order to deepen our faith.

To close this morning, we need worship and we need one another on this discipleship journey. God is worthy of all our praise-and we can sing that out together. God’s Kingdom is breaking in, is opening up right here in this room, right here in Langham-and we can pay attention to that together. True discipleship is costly-but we can strengthen and encourage one another-together. Praise GOD!