

WESTWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH/SEPTEMBER 20, 2009

CHURCH MATTERS: WORSHIP/PSALM 100

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I. THE TEXT

The common thread through our worship for the next several weeks will be church matters – we will take a closer look at a few of the things that matter in the church, things that make the church unique. This morning our church matter is worship – this odd thing we gather here to do Sunday in and Sunday out while the rest of the world reads the New York Times and sips on Starbucks. There is perhaps no greater text giving focus to our worship than Psalm 100... hear the word of God...

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth.

² *Worship the LORD with gladness;*

come into his presence with singing.

³ *Know that the LORD is God.*

It is he that made us, and we are his;

we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

⁴ *Enter his gates with thanksgiving,*

and his courts with praise.

Give thanks to him, bless his name.

⁵ *For the LORD is good;*

his steadfast love endures forever,

and his faithfulness to all generations.

II. PRAYER: God of grace and God of mercy, pour your Spirit upon us now as we seek to hear your voice and discern your heart. Renew not only our minds but show us who you want us to be and how you want us to live – for we are yours. Amen.

III. WORSHIP SCORE

A number of years ago my husband Gary and I were in Pittsburgh to celebrate his parents' 50th wedding anniversary. Hearing that Gary was going to be in town for the weekend, the church he grew up in asked him to be the Sunday morning preacher. It was a freezing December morning but the entire Sattler clan showed up for worship and, wanting to be supportive, sat in the front pews. And, my prejudice notwithstanding, we heard a fine sermon that morning... well-placed humor, three points, beautifully made, stirring conclusion that challenged us and brought the whole thing together. But just before the post-sermon prayer, the service took a liturgical detour.

You see, Gary's favorite ne'er-do-well cousin Richie, sitting at one end of the front pew, had scored Gary's sermon. Now, I'd have given it a 10... but cousin Richie had scored the sermon a bit differently. On the back of his bulletin Richie – not a regular church-goer, as you might guess – had written a large “8.5” and was holding it face high for Gary to see. With a bit of a smile Gary bowed his head and moved right into the prayer. By the time Gary reached “Amen,” news of what cousin Richie was up to had rocketed through the family who barely managed to stifle outright guffaws.

Well, of course, cousin Richie was just trying to tweak Gary a bit, but in reality he was doing what many of us do on Sunday mornings, only without the actual score card. When it

comes to worship, there's a bit of cousin Richie in all of us. We walk into worship a bit like we go to the Hollywood Bowl, hoping we will like it. It's so easy, isn't it, when the worship hour is over, to walk back through the church doors and to our cars with a score card in our heads? The choir? – Terrific. Prayer of Confession? – way off base. Sermon? – eh. Communion? – Not quite as impressive as the Episcopalians do it. Hymns? – not my favorites.

We tend to rate the worship hour based on whether or not, or to what degree it “worked for me.” Were our personal preferences and tastes honored? Was it worship “I liked,” that met my needs and fit my definitions for what worship is supposed to look like? – concerns, by the way, we find nowhere in Scripture. Yes, there's a bit of cousin Richie, the scorekeeper, the critic in us all.

IV. GOD ON WORSHIP

But I wonder, if God could weigh in on our worship, would God have anything to say about what we do here every Sunday morning? Well, from the pages of scripture God does weigh in... there are a few important things about worship that God would have us understand.

First, I think God would advise... **in worship, God is the audience, you/we are not.** The psalm we read makes this very clear... the joyful noise we make is to the Lord, not to one another. The praises we bring are for God's ears, not for our own. “Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.” “Worship the Lord with gladness.” “Give thanks to God.” “Bless God's name!” Worship is something we do for God, not for ourselves. God is the one we want to please with our worship.

Now, I suppose it is understandable that we would see worship as something that a few people up front do for those who sit in the pews. Our Sunday morning set-up is reminiscent of the set-up at any theater or concert hall. At the theater or concert the actors or the orchestra are up front working hard to make sure that the audience is having a fabulous time... it is all about you... the goal of the evening is to make sure that you are pleased. And in a sanctuary the feel is similar. You are out there, the choir and liturgists and pastors are up here. It is easy to slip into the mindset that this is a show; Lynn, Peggy, the liturgists, JK and the choir are the performers, you are the audience... the point is to please you.

But that is not what we are up to here. In our worship, God is the audience. Imagine, if you will, a different Sunday morning set-up. Imagine that we could squeeze all of you right up here with Peggy and me and the organ and choir. Granted, it would be a tight fit. And then, imagine God sitting out there where you normally sit... an audience of one. And our work up here, the goal of the morning is to make sure that God is pleased, that God is having a fabulous time. You see, worship is all about God. Worship is our offering to God, not the preacher and choir's offering to the members.

And so the questions we ask ourselves after worship are not, did I like worship today? Did worship meet my expectations and fit my personal preferences? Rather, the question is, was God honored and pleased with what I, what we offered today?

The second thing I think God would advise us follows closely on the first... **if God is the audience and you are not, then worship is not a spectator sport.** Pew sitters are not bench sitters waiting to be called into the game. Neither are pew sitters ticket holders sitting in the stadium watching the game happen down on the field. Pew sitters are not worship critics... they are worshippers. When you walk into this sacred space you are a participant, a player, not a

watcher, not a couch potato. **Our** audience, **God**, is pleased when we arrive in this sanctuary not as spectators, but ready and anxious to actively engage in worship.

As worship participants, hymns, whether or not we like the tune are our opportunity for praise; hymns are theology and prayer set to music – and so we pay attention to the words and we offer them to God from our heart. As participants, we understand the prayers as opportunities for intimate communion with God. When our minds wander to the grocery list or to the next event of the day – as they tend to – we bring them back to our conversation with God. As participants we come to the sermon, be it a bit dull or a barnburner, as eager listeners, we pay diligent attention, our hearts open to hearing a word from God. As participants, we celebrate the offering as our chance to put our money where we say our heart is. Communion will be a sacred moment when we relive, in the act of remembering, the grace of God revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Whole-hearted worship is a doorway to the divine – to put it in theological terms, as Scottish theologian James Torrance (1923-2003) put it: “Worship is the gift of participating by the power of the Spirit in the incarnate Son’s communion with the Father.”

In other words, rather than **watching** worship, we **do** worship. The evaluation we do on the way out the door is not, “was the choir good?” “Was today’s sermon an 8.5 or a 2.6?” “Did I like the style of communion or the tone of the anthem? No, we ask, “what kind of worshiper was I this morning?” Did I show up with a humble and open heart? Was my singing detached or half-hearted? Was I engaged in the prayers and listening carefully for God’s word to me in the sermon or the silence? What can I take with me – from the sermon, from a hymn, from the sacred music – that will transform a bit of my character or my relationships or my devotion this week? Was I open to what the Spirit of God wanted to do in my life? Was I a spectator? A critic? or did I worship? As Professor Constance Cherry puts it, “From beginning to end, our best understanding of worship—what worship should be—is a very participative event, where the worshipers are called upon to invest, to speak, to bow, to do, to get busy... to do it. Worship is something that is *done*.¹”

The final word God might give us this morning follows closely on the first two. I think God would caution us... **there is no one right worship form, only one right worship spirit.** 20th century theologian Paul Tillich asserted that we “absolutize our geography,” by which he meant that we make what-we-know-best the template for all the world – including worship. And that makes sense, of course, because worship touches us at our deepest places, holds powerful memories, can feel a bit like the best of home. We have a deep sense of the way worship is supposed to be and anything other than that does not qualify as true worship. And so the modern American church has waged the worship wars over the last several decades – this music or that, guitars or organ, robes or street clothes – somehow believing that what God cared about was the style of worship.

Noted preacher and professor Thomas Long assesses the fallout from the conflicts over worship styles this way... “faithful people in many congregations have been hurt, angered, and alienated... the worship board in many congregations is now the church’s version of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.”² I’m pretty sure worship wars are not on God’s agenda for the church.

Prior to my arrival in June, in my ongoing conversation with the CPNC I learned there was significant anxiety in the congregation about my earlier affiliation with Brentwood Presbyterian Church – known affectionately to some in the presbytery as the “piano bar” church. “She’s going to make us sing those awful bouncing ball praise ditties,” was the

expressed fear. I want to go on record that I've no such intention – that is not this particular church's call and not a week goes by that I am not stirred by the majesty of what we and our choirs offer to God. I'm not going to meddle with what is so glorious.

So – having settled that matter, let us ask ourselves for heuristic purposes: if worship is something we do for God and not ourselves, can we come to realize that God's tastes in worship, as in many things, may well be much more broad and inclusive than our own? Could it be that God is as pleased with the beat of the drum and the strum of the guitar as God is with the liquid, majestic tones of the organ? Might God be as at home with an African chant as with a Latin beat as with a European aria as with a Christmas Jazz service? High and hazy or low and lazy, the style of liturgy matters less to God than the spirit in which our worship is done... and the heart from which it springs. There is not one right way, but there is a right heart. God is pleased with Brentwood's worship... and Beverly Hills worship... with Bel Air's worship... and God is pleased Westwood's worship... when it comes from a right heart.

Tom Long continues his conversation about the heart of the worshiper. He writes, "Let me be specific. I despise the hymn *In the Garden*. I find it sentimental, sloppily romantic, individualistic to the point of narcissism, and theologically suspect, and that's just for starters. However, if this is the hymn for the day, the [spirit of true worship] demands that I sing it with all the gusto I can muster. Why? For the sake of Stan Williams, who is sitting in the next pew and for whom this hymn is the deepest expression of Christian piety... now Stan is obliged to sing lustily "For All the Saints," one of my favorites, but I am also to romp with joy [through] "In the Garden." Long concludes... "God is doing something with us in worship that transcends our preferences and tastes."

Worship done from a right heart expands to embrace the other, to recognize that the gifts others want to offer God may not always look precisely like the ones we might offer. Worship that honors God does not set limits on what the Spirit can use or question what the Spirit might be up to with something that is not to our particular liking.

V. OUR WORSHIP SCORE

Shortly, you will walk out of this sanctuary to your cars, perhaps with that score card in your head. How will you rate worship this morning? Not the quality of the sermon or how well the liturgist read... not whether the music or prayers worked for you [or whether you liked singing *Jesus Loves Me* at the baptism]. Rather, how will you score the quality of **your** worship. Was God the audience or were you? Were you a spectator, a critic, or participant? Did you listen with an open heart, sing with passion, think with an engaged mind, listen for something to take with you?

You don't have to like every aspect of worship, you don't have to agree with everything that is said from the pulpit – you don't have to show up feeling giddy with joy, you don't have to pretend that you don't have your occasional doubts, but to be church, what God suggests is that – as we do with anything that matters – we put our hearts and minds into worship as best we can, in remembrance and celebration of all that God has done, is doing, and will do for us in Jesus Christ.

Amen and amen.

¹ Constance Cherry, "*From Passive to Participative Worship*"

² Tom Long, *The Living Pulpit/January-March 2004*, page 34.