

## The Heart of Worship

Sterling UMC

September 20, 2009

Matthew 22:34-40, Romans 12:1-2

If you were here last Sunday then you know that I began a sermon series called becoming A Five Talent Church. I spoke to you about how the Lord lovingly challenges us to aggressively invest our talents and resources and to multiply them within the church and the community, expanding them numerically and spiritually in mission and ministry.

I shared with you that we as a congregation had entered into a covenant to seek to achieve a series of goals around five keys areas of ministry. And this morning I would like to continue our series and spend our time together reflecting on one of those areas of ministry, the area of worship.

Let me ask you this question, and think about it for a few moments... "Why are you here in this worship service? Why did you get up this early on a Sunday morning, perhaps your only day off from work, and get dressed and come to church?"

While most of our community sleeps in late, or hits the golf course, reads the Sunday paper with a cup of coffee, or beats the rush to Wal-Mart, we choose to gather in this place to sing songs, offer prayers, to give away our money, and to gear some guy in a dress talk to us. Why?

Maybe you're here out of habit. You're family has come to this church on Sunday morning ever since you were a child and it's just always been something you've done so since it's Sunday, you're here.

Perhaps you're here because you feel pressured to be here. Maybe it's your parents, or a spouse that has compelled you to come either by force, threat, or guilt. And instead of fighting it every Sunday you've decided to just come to church to avoid the hassle.

Or maybe you're here for the fellowship. You're friends are here and so this is a chance for you to get together to catch up on the week's events, a chance to greet one another with a hug or a hand shake, a chance to have some company for a change.

Maybe you're here because you're hurting. It has been a rough week, and things aren't going as you think they should at work or at home, so you've come hoping to hear a solution to your problem and find some sense of hope and healing.

Or maybe you're just here to be entertained and you're hoping we'll sing an older song that will take you back to yesteryear, or that you'll hear the preacher tell a funny story that you can tell over a cup of coffee tomorrow at work.

Whatever the reason, I'm glad you're here and I hope you find what you are looking for. The church should be a part of your regular weekly routine and I do applaud parents who have the courage to make sure their kids are in church on Sunday. And I hope you do find a rich fellowship here because that is one of the things we need, and if you are hurting I pray that a word is spoken to heal your pain, a word of hope that will inspire you. But let me say this, if you are a Christian and any of those things are your

primary reason for being here... then you're here for the wrong reason.

The primary reason for attending a church service should be to worship God. The psalmist said in Psalms 95:6-7, "Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker; for He is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care."

Friends Worship is the reason why we exist. Worship is to the Christian life what the mainspring is to a watch, what the engine is to a car. It is the very core, the most essential element.

I don't know if you've ever wondered what keeps a pastor awake at night. Somehow, I doubt it. But I'm going to tell you anyway. It's not the next finance committee meeting, or the latest tidbit from the rumor mill, or some of the petty issues that swirl around the church.

Something else keeps me awake at night: statistics like this. George Barna conducted a survey recently and found that nearly two-thirds of regular church attendees say they have never experienced God's presence at a church service. 48% of regular church attendees have not experienced God's presence in the past year.

These are exactly the kind of statistics that give me nightmares, or that keep me awake late at night. The primary purpose of the church is worship, and yet most haven't experienced God's presence at a church service. This is not good news.

Friends if we are to become a Five Talent Church that cannot be true in our congregation. We need to make worship a priority. If we are going to be able to sustain our desire and achieve our goals to grow toward spiritual maturity, become closer to God, and develop a deep fellowship with Him then we must get back to the heart of worship.

And in order to do that we need to clear up some misconceptions about worship; about it's necessity, it's meaning, it's significance, and it's practice.

1. Well, one basic misconception that is held by many believers these days....is that worship is OPTIONAL.

Now, nothing could be farther from the truth. Worship is not a luxury. It's not merely a pleasant experience that we can take or leave. It is an absolute necessity if our faith is to survive.

You see, this fallen world is constantly pulling us away from God...away from things that fan the flames of faith and foster our spiritual growth. The only antidote is CONSTANT RENEWAL of our relationship with God by means of communing with Him through worship.

We need—require—worship. We need this activity that deepens our relationship with God...not only to take away our fears and give us the strength to live but also so that we can become the individuals that God designed us to be.

In worship God's voice comes to our hearts as He whispers to us of His Hopes for us. In worship we remember His plan for our lives and we recommit ourselves to it. We pledge to living as He would want us to live. Worship is the best in us striving to be better. It is the man I am YEARNING towards the man God wants me to be.

And, worship is not only an essential for us as individuals...it is also a requirement for any local congregation as well. The church must worship to live. Worship provides the inspiration for everything else the church does.

Everything flows out of worship. No ministry for God will succeed if worship is neglected. Before we can represent Christ as we should, or imitate him in our caring ministry, we must spend time with him and learn from him. So, worship is an essential. It is not optional. It must be a priority in us as individuals and as a church.

2. And then another misconception about worship is that it is an OUTWARD EXPRESSION.

In the same way that people confuse the church with merely a building—something visible and outward—they think that worship must be something that is visible from the outside. But this is not true because genuine worship is something that happens inside. It is a matter of the heart. When King David discovered this he wrote Psalm 51:16-17 and said, “Oh Lord, You do not delight in sacrifice or I would bring it; You do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart O God, You will not despise.”

True worship is not about the songs, the prayers, the instruments, or the choir. All of those things contribute toward a great expression of worship but the essence of worship is when your heart and soul, the core of your being, connects with the Spirit of God. So you see, you can LOOK like you are worshiping but not actually BE worshiping. You can lift your hands higher than anyone else in praise. You can sing the great hymns of the church with perfect pitch...but still not be worshiping God because true worship is not an outward expression. It is an inward attitude.

3. And then some people incorrectly think that the METHOD of worship matters...when in reality it does not.

I say this because in order for worship to be healthy and productive, the elements of worship must be balanced so that they appeal to BOTH the heart and the mind. Unfortunately many churches these days make the mistake of trying to appeal to only one or the other.

a. For example...some churches specialize in generating EMOTION in their worship.

Platform people are expert at moving attendees to laughter or tears. Prayers are offered in a very dramatic style and are often even bathed in moving background music. Attendees evaluate or rate this kind of service according to how it makes them FEEL. Unfortunately after a while the law of diminishing returns sets in. And when this happens stories have to get more dramatic, songs more sentimental, preaching more rousing to keep people having intense emotional experiences.

But, worship that is imbalanced in this way is often shallow, sometimes artificial, and rarely reflective because little or no attention is given to worshiping with the mind. This kind of worship tends to produce disciples who have little depth or rooted-ness.

b. And then at the other end of the spectrum are those churches that focus only on the MIND.

They recite great creeds, their pastors give out tons of exegetical information in their study of the Scriptures. They carefully follow the lectionary in planning each Sunday's service. And yet the heart and spirit are not seized with the wonder and passion that characterizes those in the Bible who fell on their faces when they encountered the living God. In worship that is unbalanced in this way worshipers are rarely so moved that they actually move. Those who attend such services may be competent to spot theological error, but the unspoken truth is that they are a little bored. Their worship is dry. It does not connect with their deepest hurts and desires.

Understand, both of these extremes are wrong because true worship—COMPLETE worship—is worship that appeals to both mind and emotion. This is why Jesus says, “A time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks.” We must pursue worship that links well-ordered minds with overflowing hearts. We must have powerful testimonies AND well-thought out prayers. We must learn from the great wisdom found in traditional hymns and be moved by simple but often profound truth of today’s praise choruses. Our sermons must inspire and inform.

So, in order to experience worship in all its fullness it must be structured in a balanced way so that it appeals to both heart and mind.

So as you experience all the elements of a worship service, ask yourself two questions:

What does God want me to understand?

What does He want me to feel?

4. And then a fourth misconception is embraced by those people who buy into the myth that worship is for us. They act as if we are the AUDIENCE when in reality God is.

You see, these days more and more people have the tendency to approach worship as consumers. They focus on sitting back with arms folded and saying to those leading worship, Wow me. Do something that will grab my attention and catch my interest. They assume worship to be like watching a movie...it’s something they critique afterwards. They come to worship each week to be entertained and tend to view worship as something done TO them or FOR them, rather than BY them. Unfortunately MOST Americans expect worship to satisfy or please them, not to honor or please God.

People who look at worship this way have it all backwards. It is not for us. It is for God. He is the audience...not us. The word worship literally means, worth-ship which means that we worship that which is worthy. And the Bible of course teaches that ONLY God is worthy of our worship. So when we worship God, we are declaring HIS worth....not our own...which is what we do when we selfishly demand our own worship style.

When we look at worship as something to please or entertain us, we insult God. So remember, in worship God is the audience. Our worship is our offering to Him. It is a time to focus on pleasing Him and not ourselves.

And then one other misconception that I have noticed floating around these days is that...

5. ...worship only takes place in a CHURCH.

Many people erroneously believe that worship only happens in this room or one like it on Sunday mornings for about an hour or so. But in reality, for the Christian, worship is a 24-7 thing. We worship God every moment of every day of our lives. This is because when Jesus came He revolutionized the concept of worship by freeing it from the restraints of time and geographical location. No longer is it a matter of When and where to worship but When and where is it possible NOT to worship. You see, before Christ, people were taught to go to the temple to be in God’s presence; now WE are the temple of the Holy Spirit. Where we go, the Spirit of Jesus goes; and where Jesus goes, worship goes.

Worship isn't supposed to end when this service ends. No, in fact often the greatest acts of worship take place when we leave this room and act on what we learn as we obey God every day of the week.

Soren Kierkegaard once wrote a parable that told of a community of ducks waddling off to duck church one Sunday to hear their duck preacher. After they waddled into the duck sanctuary, the service began and the duck preacher spoke eloquently of how God had given the ducks wings with which to fly. He pounded the pulpit with his beak and said, With these wings, there is nowhere we ducks can not go! There is no God-given task we ducks can not accomplish!

With these wings we no longer need walk through life. We can soar high in the sky! Shouts of amen were quacked throughout the duck congregation. The duck preacher concluded his message by exclaiming, With our wings we can fly through life! WE.....CAN.....FLY!!!! More ducks quacked out loud AMENS! in response. Every duck loved the service. In fact all the ducks that were present commented on what a wonderfully convicting message they had heard from their duck preacher...and then they left the church and waddled all the way home.

I don't know about you but I think their worship was kind of fowl because they didn't act on what they had heard. They didn't live any differently as a result of corporate worship. True worship does not stop when a service of worship stops. It leads to practical ministry. In Romans 12:1 Paul said that the only reasonable response to encountering God in worship is to, ...offer our bodies—our lives -- as living sacrifices holy and pleasing to God...

People who really understand worship see every task of every day as an opportunity to worship God. Worship is a lifestyle. In fact, if worship does not translate into a changed life, it is a sham. Those who waddle in should not waddle out. You see, God is not as much interested in the activities of worship as He is in the actions of life. Christians who worship genuinely respond on Sundays as did Isaiah by saying, "God, Here am I send me. Take my life and accept it as an offering to You. Use it from here on as You see fit."

And, this leads us now to the most important part of this particular service of worship, the time we set aside for the purpose of publicly responding to God. We have been talking about getting back to basics, about reading and studying the Bible, about practicing the discipline of prayer, about the importance of living a life of worship. Ask yourself if there is any part of your life that you need to offer to God this morning...maybe there are some changes you need to make, some priorities you need to rearrange, some areas you need to focus on, some commitments you need to make. God may be calling you to dedicate your marriage to Him...or your parenting...or your career...or your relationships with neighbors. He may be leading you to join this church, our getting more involved or connected, giving Him your life to use in helping us fulfill our purpose as a local body of believers. Or, you may be here this morning and are not a Christian and you realize that you have never truly given your heart to Jesus Christ.

Now, if you don't get anything else I've said today, I want you to get this one truth, because it will revolutionize your life. In life it's not WHAT you do that matters; it is WHO you do it for. You give it all to God. And all of your work can be turned to worship.

You see, real worship is a lifestyle.