

“WORSHIP AND SUNDAY MORNING”

by

R. Charles Grant, D.Min.

Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

Bryn Mawr, PA

Readings: Psalm 84
I Kings 8
John 4:19-24

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time - August 22, 2010

John 4:19-24

¹⁹The [Samaritan] woman [at the well] said to [Jesus] “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” ²¹Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

Psalm 84:1-12

¹How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts!

²My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.

³Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young, at your altars,
O LORD of hosts, my King and my God.

⁴Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise.

⁵Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion.

⁶As they go through the valley of Baca they make it a place of springs;

the early rain also covers it with pools.

⁷They go from strength to strength; the God of gods will be seen in Zion.

⁸O LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer; give ear, O God of Jacob!

⁹Behold our shield, O God; look on the face of your anointed.

¹⁰For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.

I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness.

¹¹For the LORD God is a sun and shield; he bestows favor and honor.

No good thing does the LORD withhold from those who walk uprightly.

¹²O LORD of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you.

1 Kings 8:1, 6, 10-11, 22-30

¹Then Solomon assembled the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the leaders of the ancestral houses of the Israelites, before King Solomon in Jerusalem, to bring up the ark of the covenant of the LORD out of the city of David, which is Zion.

⁶Then the priests brought the ark of the covenant of the LORD to its place, in the inner sanctuary of the house, in the most holy place, underneath the wings of the cherubim.

¹⁰And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the LORD, ¹¹so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD.

²²Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and spread out his hands to heaven. ²³He said, "O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart, ²⁴the covenant that you kept for your servant my father David as you declared to him; you promised with your mouth and have this day fulfilled with your hand. ²⁵Therefore, O LORD, God of Israel, keep for your servant my father David that which you promised him, saying, 'There shall never fail you a successor before me to sit on the throne of Israel, if only your children look to their way, to walk before me as you have walked before me.' ²⁶Therefore, O God of Israel, let your word be confirmed, which you promised to your servant my father David.

²⁷"But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built! ²⁸Regard your servant's prayer and his plea, O LORD my God, heeding the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you today; ²⁹that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you said, 'My name shall be there,' that you may heed the prayer that your servant prays toward this place. ³⁰Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling place; heed and forgive."

Presbyterian minister and author Frederick Buechner confesses that he does not go to church much anymore. **"I hate to say this,"** he said, **"but for many years now I've taken to going to church less and less, because I find so little there of what I hunger for. It's a sense of the presence of God that I hunger for."**

Theologian Edward FARLEY, one of my professors at Vanderbilt University's Divinity School, sounds a similar theme: "To experience the typical 'Protestant Sunday Morning'," Farley says, "Is to experience something odd, something like a charade. Judging from the discourse (prayers, hymns, scriptures) one would think that the event has something to do with a sacred presence. The oddity is that this discourse is neutralized by the prevailing corporate mood which is casual, comfortable, chatty, busy, dressy, humorous, pleasant, and at times even cute...God is talked TO and ABOUT, but minus the terrible mystery - a mystery which should set language atremble, silence facile chattiness, and scare us a bit. In the mood of 'Sunday Morning' the seraphim would address God not as *'holy, holy, holy,'* but *'nice, nice, nice'*". (SPIRE Sum97)

When I am on vacation or study leave, I try and visit other churches on Sunday morning. I often hear beautiful music (seldom as good as ours), see vibrant communities of faith, even at times hear some good preaching. But I confess, a sense of WORSHIP is usually missing. I know what Buechner and Farley mean.

And apparently Buechner and Farley, and I are not alone. Fewer and fewer people attend worship on a regular basis. So, for some time, church growth specialists have focused on how to boost Sunday morning attendance. The question is, attendance *at WHAT*. At WORSHIP? Or at a friendly, comfortable, pleasant community where faith is practiced, but *WORSHIP* seldom occurs?

Of course, I am preaching to the choir. After all, YOU ARE HERE. And I suspect you came here hoping that somehow, by the grace of God, and maybe even despite the preacher, *worship* would happen for you.

A little boy was visiting his grandfather's church. On the way out the door he saw a plaque listing service men killed during war. "What is that?" the boy asked. "Those are the persons who died in the service." Eyes wide, the boy asked, "*Was that at 8 or 10?*"

I remember one year when our son Chris came home from the Montreat Youth conference, we badgered him with the usual parental questions. "How was it? Tell me about the preacher for the week." "The speaker was great," he said, "Nothing like you! If you preached like him the church would fire you in a week."

The WORSHIP of GOD stands right in the center of our Presbyterian tradition. But we don't have a reputation for it being particularly interesting or uplifting or even mysterious. Worship is what we do and what we stand for. But too often we leave here

with our worship cups empty, not filled. Too often, too many people wonder, *how many people DID DIE during the 8:00 service?*

This morning I want to simply ask, what is worship?

WHAT IS WORSHIP? Worship is what we do in response to what God has done for us. And what God has done is create this wonderful, beautiful world, teeming with life. What God has done is bring US life.

What God has done is reveal the mystery and power of life through generations of humankind and through the man Jesus. That's what GOD DOES. And what WE DO in worship is give thanks to God for what God has done. What we do in worship is offer our praise to God for God's goodness, and continue the process of sorting out what that gratitude means for every nook and cranny of life.

Worship is adoration. The first definition of adoration is "worship". And the second is, "profound love or regard." Worship, then, is the act of reverence for the mystery we call God. Worship is devotion to and love for the source of all goodness and love.

In a sense worship is more about US than it is about God. In worship we reveal our inner needs, and express our deepest held values. Show me what and whom you worship, and you show me what and who you are.

Worship is about us. But in a deeper sense, worship is about GOD, for what we do in worship we do because we are worshipping GOD. God, the source of goodness and beauty, God, the basis of truth and justice, God, the fascinating mystery beyond all mystery. Worship is the ADORATION of GOD.

One summation of religious faith is "**You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and strength - and YOUR NEIGHBOR as yourself.**" We worship God by opening ourselves to God AND to neighbor.

Worship is the discipline of opening yourself to God through prayer and listening to the word, and participating in the liturgy of worship. Worship is something we LEARN to do and learn to MASTER. And worship is for ALL of God's people: Children and youth, as well as adults, are capable of worshipping God. Which is why it is important for children to be here in worship, so they can learn the discipline and acquire the skills for more mature forms of worship.

In worship we bring to God all that we are. And we let go of what we are, so that we can be filled and refilled by the power and spirit of God.

St Augustine said, "**My heart is restless until it rests in thee.**" We worship God because we NEED to worship God. Worship addresses our most fundamental human needs: the need to find affirmation; the need to receive and extend forgiveness; the need to live connected with other people; the need to find our identity in the present, our roots

in the past, and our place in the future; the need to be connected with the well-spring of life, source of truth, and power of justice; the need to experience the mystery of the ultimate good we call "God".

If worship fills such basic human needs, *why do so many shun it?* Why do we COME, but all too often LEAVE HERE feeling affirmed and feeling connected, but also still YEARNING for the courts of the Lord?

Worship takes both COURAGE and HUMILITY: courage to admit before God and neighbor "I AM A SINNER"; and humility to admit before God "I who am a sinner *await your mercy.*"

Worship can be painful: in worship we confront ourselves, and end up having to admit things about ourselves we would just as soon NOT admit. Worship hurts. Remember the story of Jacob wrestling with God by the river Jabbock? Jacob was never the same AFTER that episode, carrying a limp with him the rest of his life.

We shy away from worship because it hurts. It doesn't fit with our feel-good-at-all-costs mentality. It doesn't fit with the popular mood for "Sunday morning". And being content to be worship-less, we also remain empty, unfulfilled, separated from the very God we yearn for.

There has long been a tension over when and where to worship: whether worship involves ritual or is centered in the prophetic word. On the one hand, if worship is LIMITED to the rituals of Sunday morning, and is not LIVED "24/7", then it is not authentic worship.

On the other hand, worship apart from the church, and without any sort of outward, public ritual, might be of the heart, but the worshipper is completely "on his own", and accountable to no one but himself.

In his preaching Jesus sided with that part of his tradition that emphasized that authentic worship springs from the HEART, and is not shaped by sacred space or formal liturgy. For Jesus, worship was primarily how you LIVE. Jesus prayed in the temple and preached at the synagogue, but his home base was the worship of God in SPIRIT and in TRUTH: to seek out the presence of God and to respond to that presence with a God-like life.

For us, I think the answer to the question of when and where to worship is WITH God's people at the time and in the place where God's people gather FOR WORSHIP. I rejoice with all who are worshipping God this morning in the comfortable confines of their family rooms, or out under the blue sky. Or at the shore, or up in the Poconos. But as wonderful as those places are, they don't have much to do with the worship of God. Worship is about being here, with God's children, PUBLICLY expressing our thanksgiving to God, PUBLICLY admitting our sin, and PUBLICLY confessing our faith.

A Japanese Samurai came to a master monk one day, saying, "I have mastered the martial arts. Now teach me about God."

The monk took a tea pot and began pouring tea into a cup, continuing to pour until the tea overflowed onto the table and the floor.

The Samurai exclaimed, "What are you doing? Stop, the cup will hold no more tea!"

The old monk replied, "You are so full of yourself that there is no room for God. *It is not possible for you to learn until you empty yourself.*" (Stories for the Journey, p 63)

Friends: God would fill you with life and love overflowing. But first there must be room for God. Open yourself before God. Empty yourself FOR God. Worship the Lord your God in spirit and in truth.

*How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts!
Our souls long, indeed they faint for the courts of the LORD;
our hearts and our flesh sing for joy to the living God. (Psalm 84)*