

## **5 Practices of Fruitful Congregations: Wholehearted Worship**

### **Psalm 96                  Romans 12:1-2**

Our series this winter: 5 practices of fruitful congregations. Reminder: these are practices of *fruitful* congregations, not big or busy congregations. Often times churches are more fruitful when they abide by the principle, “less is more.” That’s true in our personal lives as well. Jesus, in John 15, talked about pruning back branches so they could bear more fruit. That’s the agricultural principle of “less is more,” and it applies to our lives, and to congregations.

And by “fruitful” we mean blessing, doing good and beneficial things that truly help others and bring lasting wholeness and peace and wellbeing to others and to the world. Two weeks ago: hospitality and welcome. This morning: wholehearted worship.

We just heard another wonderful Psalm of praise—in addition to the psalms from the call to worship and prayer of praise—these delightful expressions of worship, praising God for who God is and what God does, and inviting people to rejoice together. Now we turn our attention to the apostle Paul’s teaching from Romans 12.

## **Romans 12:1–2**

**12**I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. <sup>2</sup>Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect (maturing; growing up).

This is the word of the Lord.

Many years ago, I served in a church that was doing a thorough self-study during their interim time. As they prepared to search for a new pastor, they were asking questions like, “Who are we now?” and “What is God calling us to do going forward?” Those are excellent questions, and as churches often did in those liminal, in-between times of learning and exploration, they sent out a survey to the members and friends of the church, to gather information that could help the team conducting the study to find direction and vision for their congregation.

One small set of questions was about peoples’ worship experience. They asked, “Why do you come to worship?” and “What do you hope to receive, or what do you hope will happen, when you attend worship services?” The results, as you can imagine, were varied. And they held true to the old adage that if you ask 5 people about something you’ll get 10 different opinions. However, the

answers were informative and perhaps as you hear these you'll find yourself in these responses, if you ponder your own response to the questions.

Why do I come to worship? What do I hope to receive?

- Some said, for inspiration; to receive encouragement for another week and get my batteries charged.
- To learn (my adult education for the week); I want to hear a good message to learn more about the Bible and about God and how to live as a Christian.
- I come to find a safe place, refuge from the storms and stresses of life—a sanctuary, in the protection and safety sense of that word.
- For others, it's sanctuary in the original sense of that word: a holy place; this is my experience of the holiness and majesty of God that I don't get Monday through Saturday. I'm hoping for an experience of transcendence, something bigger than myself.
- Music; I like to sing or just listen and enjoy hearing the songs being sung by the congregation, or played by instrumentalists.
- I go to church because of my children; I want them to grow up with faith.
- To see my friends—the worship service and mingling afterward is where I connect; I come mainly for the social aspect of the fellowship of friends.

- To pray and praise and thank God; worship is my main prayer experience for the week.
- There were a couple others who said: I don't know why; I've just always gone to church; it's habit. My Sunday would feel off if I didn't go. And one who said, "My spouse makes me." Keeping the peace at home is the goal there!

I love this variety of responses. Because they are all good, and appropriate. If you happen to ponder your response to the question, it's important to know that there are no right or wrong answers. Only *your* answers. In hindsight I'm not so sure that asking people what their motives are for coming to worship was actually that helpful, because God knows what people need and where they are on their journey. And, the reasons can change over time... I'll talk about this more next week when we talk about faith development. Faith is a *journey*, not a state of being, and everyone is to be honored for where they are on their journey, as we all change and grow over time. Stay tuned!

While there are no right or wrong answers for *why* people worship, there is an invitation, though, no matter what the reason is for coming to a worship service. And the invitation is to have an experience of, a connection with, the divine, in some way.

As we talk about worship, we're talking about an experience—a unique experience—that is meant to cause us to go forth from it as changed people, *over time*. Over time. Seldom is anyone changed by a single worship service. But like eating good meals nourishes us over time, the worship experience *over time* results in people who are becoming more of what God created us to be, and doing what God has gifted us to do in the world. That's the fruitfulness part—going forth to do what God has gifted us to do. So the question may not be, “*Why we come to worship?*” but “*What we do in response to the worship experience?*”

Worship is vital to the life and vitality of a congregation. Some would say that it's the most important thing that we do as a church, because everything flows out of worship: our life together, our identity, and our calling to serve the world; our mission. It all flows from the worship experience.

It's been that way from the very beginning: in Exodus 5 God gave Moses instructions to tell Pharaoh: “Let my people go so that...” they may have fellowship? No. That they may enjoy the comforts of a prosperous life? No. Over and over as the plagues were visited upon Pharaoh and his people, Moses spoke God's word to him: “Let my people go so that... they may worship me.” Freedom meant freedom to worship, and be God's covenant people, without

constraints. It was that important, because their identity as a people was to be shaped and formed by their worship.

Whenever Christians are persecuted around the world, as many are, still, today, the first thing the oppressors take away is public worship—or, they try to manage it by state-sanctioned religious services. Intuitively they know that the church is strongest, and the presence of Jesus is most real when the people are gathered, in freedom, for worship. And oppressors know that when God’s people worship, it changes things because worshipers become change agents in the world. And when public worship is taken away by persecutors, the church always goes underground: the Jesus people find ways and places to secretly gather for corporate worship—because they know *they need it*.

We experienced this in a small way when we took groups of high school students and adults from Anchorage, AK, to Mexico, to do mission work in small village churches. These churches were independent churches of mostly poor and marginal folks, typically somewhat Pentecostal in nature. And we would hear stories about local authorities, or state-sanctioned religious officials attending their services uninvited, and they would stand in back to monitor what was being said and done, as a way of intimidating them to keep them in line. One pastor

told us of a church that got shut down and the pastor was arrested and thrown in jail because they were too outspoken about the corruption in local government and the corruption of the state church. So, these folks were risking themselves by continuing to gather. And we risked going there! Btw, that's one of the 5 practices of fruitful congregations: risk-taking in service and mission. That's coming up in two weeks.

Worship is something that Christians throughout the world know that they need. They need God, they need each other, and they need the worship experience. As we read the Old Testament, though, we see that worship was not only *commended*, it was sometimes *commanded*.

The great commandment in Deuteronomy 6 to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength (which we will look at more closely next week) was understood by the Hebrew people as a call to corporate worship. It was used *every week* in synagogue and temple worship, at the beginning of their services. In Hebrew it's called the Shema ("Shema" in Hebrew means to hear, or listen, or take heed), because that's how Deuteronomy 6 begins: "Hear O Israel!" Or "Listen!") The Lord your God, the Lord, is one: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength."

That was understood as a corporate call to worship, practically in the form of a command, to love God wholeheartedly, with their entire being. And like God's people of old, we have to make the decision to love God, sometimes in spite of ourselves and our feelings. And the wonderful thing about that is, that's often when great worship takes place. In times like those, when worship becomes a decision I make in spite of my feelings, it is an act of high and holy praise, and when God is often most real to us. Because we are bringing our whole self with us—heart, soul, mind, and strength.

The apostle Paul's way of saying this is: *"Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice... this is your true and proper worship. Don't be conformed to the spirit of the age, but be transformed... so that you may know what God's will is."* To paraphrase: bring your whole self—all of you (just like it says in Deut. 6). And let that experience transform your life, for good, so you will be more and more in alignment with God's will, *over time*.

And this isn't easy, as we know, to consistently offer our whole selves as living sacrifices. Because the problem with *living* sacrifices is that they tend to keep crawling off of the altar!



And so, the invitation from our living and loving God, and eventually the decision for us, is to do our best to continue offering ourselves. Because we know we need it; we need worship, we need transformation.

Worship isn't a requirement or a command from God for us, as if God demands it. God doesn't have a fragile ego that *needs* peoples' worship. God doesn't need to be appeased, and God doesn't require groveling and demand gratitude because he'll be offended if people don't do those things. As if God's feelings are easily hurt and God's ego needs a boost. No, God *invites* us to worship because it helps us surrender *our* ego.

Worship is a *celebration* of who God is and what God does and has done. It's why we use Psalms regularly in worship, because Psalms consistently celebrate what God has done and is doing, because... *God is good*. That's the affirmation in the whimsical line from Psalm 34, from our prayer of praise: "*taste and see that God is good.*" Notice the verb: taste. It's an experience. He doesn't say, "Think and believe that God is good." That's fine, but what we're after is the *experience* of God's goodness. In freedom. *Taste* that the Lord is good.

So, God doesn't *require* worship as much as God invites us to worship because it's a mutual delighting. It helps us know God and delight in God, and be known by God as God delights in us.

And, it forms us: we become transformed and renewed, as it says in Romans. And as it says in the wonderful encouragement in Psalm 34, “*Look to God and be radiant; so our faces shall never be covered with shame.*” That’s a great line from Scripture that you can put on a sticky note and reflect on every morning as you begin your day: “Look to God, and be radiant; so your face will never be covered with shame.” Look at you, you radiant people! Only a good God does that, only a good God removes shame. God doesn’t give shame or shame anyone; God *removes* shame. So, worship is a celebration of our God, who is good.

And, worship builds community. Worship can be done privately and individually, of course, yet the invitation is to “magnify the Lord *with me*, and let us exalt God’s name *together*” as it says in our prayer of praise from Psalm 34. Which, by the way, includes our online community. The blessing of this livestream (thank you, Covid, which necessitated this. And thank you livestream operators!) is that folks who can’t make it in person can be part of this gathering. That’s a good thing. It creates community.

God’s people of old, and Christ’s church throughout history believed that worship was essential because their identity as the people of God, their solidarity as a community of faith, and their well-being as humans depended upon their

corporate worship experience. Worship is where they learned how to pray, it's where they learned **who** they are and were reminded of **whose** they are; it's where they learned about God's will and how to live as God's people *in the world*.

And so, therefore, what matters most about worship... what matters most about worship, is not what style of worship it is, or what kind of music is sung, or whether it's a highly liturgical service that's quiet and contemplative, or a loud free-wheeling high-octane service with hands waving. *What matters most about worship is: what kind of people are being formed by that worship, and sent into the world.* The goal is to shape and form a people who are awake and alive to God and to God's purposes in the world, and in their lives. To use Jesus' language, to bear fruit that will last.

Again, the primary issue is not what style of worship service it is, or even whether we like it or don't like it; the primary issue is, is the worship experience helping to shape and form us as God's people? Because sometimes it's the *uncomfortable* worship experience that shapes us and transforms us. We have conditioned ourselves in our culture to believe that only a comfortable and familiar worship experience is a true and valuable worship experience. That may be *generally* true, but it is not *universally* true.

On the one hand, we do need a worship experience that speaks our language, so we can understand what's going on and be able to access the spiritual realities of the experience. And, on the other hand, worship should sometimes pinch a bit, whether it's the liturgy, the prayers, the preaching, or the music. As the old saying goes (as was said about Jesus), sometimes it should comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

In John 4 Jesus has a conversation with a Samaritan woman—which was a double border-crossing on Jesus' part, as a man spoke with a woman in public, which was a cultural taboo, and, she was a despised foreigner at that. Jews and Samaritans hated each other. Yet, they engage in a conversation about worship: where it takes place and all that, Samaritans worshiping in one particular place and in their way, and Jews worshiping in another place in their way, and who is right and wrong, whose worship is better, and all that. And Jesus blows up that whole line of thinking by saying that God is seeking after those “*who worship in spirit and in truth.*” In spirit and in truth. That is to say it's not about a specific place, or specific forms or going through the motions. It's about connecting with God, sincerely and honestly.

Spirit and truth. Spirit=a connection with the divine. Truth=we come honestly. Which, for me, means that worshiping in truth might mean that I'm

struggling with faith, or doubt, or I'm all wrapped around the axle emotionally.

But I show up anyway, and present myself, such as I am in the moment, as a living sacrifice. Because, my faith, such as it is in the moment, tells me that God is good, and that I can be part of God's good work in the world.