

Worship is Participatory & Passionate
The Primary Purpose of Worship – IV
February 12, 2017

This morning we are concluding looking at worship, one of the four primary purposes of the church. So far we have looked at worship of God being something we are supposed to do with our entire lives. The second Sunday we talked about that although God desires us to worship Him with our entire lives, and I think it's even more than God's desire, He actually commands us to worship Him with all our lives, God's greatest commandment, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and all your strength" (Mark 12:30) is synonymous with "Worship the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and all your strength," but, even though God commands us to worship Him all the time, He does desire that His people worship Him communally at times. Last week we looked at two aspects of communal worship: one, that it is prepared; and two, that is purposeful. Today we are concluding our series on worship by looking at two more elements of communal worship: one, that it be participatory; and two that it be passionate.

Really, the two are interrelated. The more passionate one is about worshipping God, the more participatory one will be. In fact I would make the claim that one cannot be passionate about God and not be participatory. Because of the two being so interrelated I went back and forth over the past week or so trying to decide which of the two to begin with. I decided to start with the participatory element. Why, because ultimately communal worship starts with the participatory part. It's hard to participate in communal worship the way God wants you to participate if you're not here. That should be a given, but in our culture today, it is not.

We all live lives that are busier than ever before, and not just a little busier, exponentially busier! We have a lot more options and a lot more distractions. Fifty to sixty years ago in America it was pretty much a given that if one claimed to be a Christian, there was a pretty good chance that he or she was going to be in a church worshipping on a Sunday. That's not the case anymore. That's not even the case for many who call themselves Christian and are a part of the church. And it's not just a American phenomena, it's a North American, European and entire Western culture phenomena. A Canadian sociologist of religion by the name of Reginald Bibby put it like this: "People aren't leaving their churches, they just aren't going to them."

But the reality is that both are taking place. People are leaving their churches and many who are staying are not going to them as regularly as people once did. Almost all the pastors that I relate to and talk to, whether it be in Logan County, or other Mennonite pastors throughout Ohio, report pretty much the same thing. Their attendance is down pretty significantly over the past five years or so. That is due to two primary reasons: one, the number who connect with the church has decreased some; and two; the number who do connect with their church (whether it be those who identify themselves as members or just attendees), are in church less frequently.

Not offering any judgment, mostly because I don't think that is something that we are called to do, but the truth is that with less people participating, the less energetic and vibrant a worship service can be. Active and consistent participation is an important element of the level of

worship we can offer God. So, as we continue to try and discern if worshiping in two services is something that God is calling us to do down the road, the number of worshippers who regularly attend each of the services on a regular basis is one of the factors we need to consider.

The other aspect of participation is what we do when we show up. Worship as designed by God is meant to be a participatory event – not just by some who have different roles in the worship service, but by everyone in attendance.

We're told throughout the Bible to "sing and make music in our hearts to the Lord," to make music with different instruments – the lyre, the harp, the tambourine, pipes, cymbals and on. We're told to lift up our hands and to clap our hands. We're told to "lift up our eyes," to "lift up our voices with a shout." // I know you might find this hard to believe, especially if you were born in the early to mid 20th century, but many even worshiped God by dancing. We're supposed to stand when we worship, and kneel, bow down, and even lay prostrate. Yes, communal worship is supposed to be a participatory event by everyone. But often we come and we just sit here, we stand when we're supposed to sing but many of us just sing kind of quietly or we move our mouths but nothing really comes out. Very rarely do we lift up our hands or clap our hands. We hardly ever bow down or kneel anymore. That's too beneath us. Yes, we say we participate, but it's rather passive. When it comes to worship we Mennonites like to be known as "the quiet in the Land." We save our passion for other things. And that's where the problem begins. The problem begins where our passion lays, or where it doesn't lay.

Passion – "a strong feeling of enthusiasm or excitement for something or about doing something; a strong feeling that causes you to act in a dangerous way; an intense doing or overmastering feeling or conviction, an object of desire or deep interest; and/or the sufferings of Christ between the night of the Last Supper and his death." *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*

In the two year spiritual transformation seminar that I am currently participating in with 70 other pastors and Christian leaders from not only the United States, but some from even other countries, we are preparing to gather again a week from tomorrow for three days. The last time we met was in the beginning of November and they gave us one question to focus on and try to answer before we get together again. That question being: "what is the one thing you desire more than everything else?" "What is your greatest desire?" Not an easy question to try and answer, but I sense that if we can get that right, everything else in our lives will flow from that.

Our desire is connected with that which we worship. What we worship is that where we spend most of our time, our attention, our money, our conversation. Much of the time we don't even know what it is. But if someone else were to follow you around, say for a month's time, and observe what you do, both in public and in private, at the end of the month they would probably be able to say what you worship most. It might be your family, it might be your job, it might be money or certain material things, it might be sports, or a specific sport, it might be facebook or some other social media, it might be games on the internet, or it might be something even worse on the internet like pornography. Or for many of us it might even be ourselves. Or a combination of those things.

Whereas God and Jesus gave us the greatest commandment in the positive form of “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength,” God gave us it in the negative form (“you shall not”) in the Ten Commandments. “You shall not have any other gods before me.” “You shall not make for yourself any idols.”

Timothy Keller in his book, *Counterfeit Gods* writes this about idols:

“An idol is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give.

A counterfeit God is anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living. An idol has such a controlling position in your heart that you can spend most of your passion and energy, your emotional and financial resources, on it without a second thought.

It can be family and children, or career and making money, or achievement and critical acclaim, or ‘saving face’ and social standing. It can be a romantic relationship, peer approval, competence and skill, secure and comfortable circumstances, your beauty or your brains, a great political or social cause, your morality and virtue, or even success in Christian ministry . . . An idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, ‘If I have that, then I’ll feel my life has meaning, then I’ll know I have value, then I’ll feel significant and secure.’ There are many ways to describe that kind of relationship to something, but perhaps the best one is *worship*.

Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*

“Idolatry is simply worship directed in any direction but God’s” A.W. Tozer

Rory Noland writes in his book, *Worship on Earth as it is in Heaven*:

“Idols are not necessarily bad in and of themselves. Many of our counterfeit gods are actually good things, which is why we pin our hopes and dreams on them. But even the best things in life can never replace God. Sin, therefore, is not just a matter of doing bad things or breaking God’s rules. Sin is letting a good thing become an ultimate thing and , therefore taking the place of God in our lives.”

When Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness, his main objective was to get Jesus to fall down and worship him. In reply Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6:13, “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve” (Mark 4:10 ESV).

Our passion is that which we put above everything else!!!

Passion is also how we express our emotions and feelings. So, if a first time visitor was to come into church on a Sunday morning, in either of our two worship services, would they say we’re passionate about Christ or not?

Our passages this morning from the Book of Revelation, as with most of the Book of Revelation, gives us a glimpse of what life is going to look like for believers after our life here on earth is over. Worship in heaven as described in the Book of Revelation is both highly participatory and unapologetically passionate. The whole multitude worships God, each with their whole heart, soul, mind and strength.

It would seem to make sense that if that is the worship God desires in heaven, then that is also the type of worship God desires here on earth. So why do we settle for unenthusiastic & passive worship? Most of us are much more inhibited than those that we read about in the Old and New Testaments and how they worshiped God.

Rory Noland writes in his book *Worship on Earth as it is in Heaven*, “Modern churchgoers are culturally conditioned and complacent, instead of actively engaged in worship. . . Worship has become a spectator sport. Unfortunately, too many of us approach church the same way – as casual observers instead of active participants. We come to listen to the music. We’ll join in and sing here and there but we mostly hang back, as if we’re spectators observing a performance. We act more like outsiders and newcomers than God’s loved children. We plop in the pew and wait for somebody to tell us that to do. The result, more often than not, is lethargic worship as opposed to passionate worship.”

For those that are visiting a church for the first time, the difference between lethargic worship and passionate worship is the difference between whether they come back again or not.

In our Scripture this morning it says that the worshipers fell down. In heaven, not only is everyone actively involved giving glory to God, the most common posture is on their knees. In the Old Testament the original word for worship means to “bow down, humbly beseech, do reverence.”

In Exodus 34:8 it says that Moses “bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped.”

Job (1:20) fell on the ground and worshiped.

In 2 Chronicles it says the people of Israel, “bowed down with their faces to the ground on the pavement and worshiped.”

The Greek word used for worship most often in the New Testament is similar in meaning, “to prostrate oneself in homage, do reverence, adore.

What was the original disciples response when they first encountered the risen Jesus? It says in Matthew 28:9, “they came to him, clasped (took hold of) his feet and worshiped him.”

What keeps us from worshiping God the way God desires to be worshiped? Most often it is our pride and fear of others. We want to avoid looking foolish, weak or awkward. We often look around at others instead of looking to the one we should be worshiping. We say to ourselves, “God knows my heart, I don’t have to sing, bow, kneel, or raise my hands to prove I love him.” But most often that’s just an excuse for the pride that lies in most of us.

King David is the only one referred by God in the Bible as “a man after my own heart.” So it would behoove us to follow his example. Not his example with Bethsheba but his example with his worship 😊. When David brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, the people celebrated and it says that “David danced with all his might . . .wearing a linen ephod” (2 Samuel 6:14). His wife criticized him for it saying his behavior was unfit for a king. David’s response:

“It was before the LORD . . .and I will make merry before the LORD. I will make myself yet more contemptible than this” (2 Samuel 6:21-22). David was saying “I don’t care how it looks to others. I’m not going to hold back when it comes to the worship of my God and King!!!

Jesus commands us to “love (and worship) the Lord our God with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind and with all our strength.”

Bringing our best worship may mean something different for each of us, depending on our personality, our temperament, and our backgrounds. But more often I think it is our pride and our concern of how it looks to others that gets in the way of worshiping God the way God desires us to worship Him.

Then there’s the other aspect of passion that follows as we follow Christ. Jesus’ passion for doing God’s will ended with complete surrender of himself and his death on the cross. That’s where our passion for following Christ must end – the complete surrender of ourselves and our death here on earth. Hence we get words from Jesus like, “take up your cross and follow me,” “when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you don’t want to go.”

I close my message this morning with these words about worship from John Piper, from a book entitled “God’s Passion for His Glory.” I’ve mentioned before that I don’t agree completely with John Piper’s theology, but I think his passion for the glory of God is unparalleled by most pastors and theologians today.

“The basic movement of worship on Sunday mornings is not to come with our hands full to give to God, as though he needed anything, but to come with our hands empty [stretched out] to receive from God. And what we receive in worship is the fullness of God, not the feelings of entertainment. We ought to come hungry for God . . .God is mightily honored when a people know that they will die of hunger and thirst unless they have God.

“Nothing makes God more supreme and more central in worship than when a people are utterly persuaded that nothing – not money or prestige or leisure or family or job or health or sports or toys or friends – nothing is going to bring satisfaction to their sinful, guilty, aching hearts besides God. This conviction breeds a people who go hard after God on Sunday morning. They are not confused about why they are in a worship service. They do not view songs and prayers and sermons as mere traditions or mere duties. They see them as means of getting to God or God getting to them for more of his fullness – no matter how painful that may be for sinners in the short run.”

Do we come hungry for God? The psalmist wrote, “As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?” (Psalm 42:1-1).