

“Worship as a Spiritual Discipline”  
Isaiah 29:13-16; Romans 12:1-3;  
John 4:19-26

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Pastor Norman Fowler  
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

What is worship? The first thing that came to my mind when I thought about the word “worship” was how these days often it’s used to talk about just the music. Oftentimes people will say, “I was worshipping,” and what they were talking about was singing songs. Perhaps there is something appropriate about that. There’s a way that music takes us away from our daily lives and lifts up our souls in some way, and enables us to perhaps have a spiritual experience.

As we think about worship, we recognize that it’s more than music. We can think about worship in a couple of different ways. We can think about worship as coming to a place, singing the songs, having a particular experience. Or, we can think about it in a broader sense.

In the book “Spiritual Disciplines Handbook,” the author, Adele Calhoun, suggests that worship is first and foremost a way of paying attention to what we honor, respect, and value. She suggests that what we worship shows what we give ultimate value and meaning in our lives. So we use worship in one way to talk about the act of coming and doing something. In another way, we begin to think about it in terms of what’s behind it. Worship, in both Hebrew and Greek, means to bow down or to give honor to. So worship is about what we honor and value.

What we worship doesn’t have to be God. What we worship can be something else. As we begin to think about how we live in a society where fewer and fewer people are actually going to worship on a Sunday morning, whether that’s because they found that to worship God works better for them in another way, or simply because they no longer worship God, I don’t know for sure, but it’s pretty clear that Sunday morning worship in the United States and Europe has contracted.

Worship does shape who we are. This is a quote from Dallas Willard: “Human beings are at their core defined by what they worship rather than primarily by what they think, know, or believe.” That is bound up with a central Augustinian claim that we are what we love. So as we begin to think about what it means to worship, one of the spiritual disciplines that we’re thinking about during this sermon series, there is this idea that what we give our honor and respect to, what we hold as our highest values, what’s ultimate for us in our lives affects who we are and changes who we are.

As we think about living in a society that has less and less ritualized worship, we may still have ways of doing things that are worshipful. We have different altars at which we can worship. It’s not hard to find what those might be. Some examples could be success, wealth, power, sex, entertainment, fame, or we could look at others. We could say there are a multitude of ways that we can find something that’s outside of

ourselves that we give honor and value to, which we think is the ultimate meaning of our lives, and thus define our lives.

I think it's pretty obvious at times. When I was in high school, I worked summers out in Nebraska on a ranch. One of the guys I worked with told me that when he went to a bigger town not too far away, he would go and find the hippies so he could fight them. This was in the mid-seventies. It's obvious that what he was worshiping in doing that was not God. That's not what worship of God leads us to do. I'm not sure exactly what it was. Was it power? Was it feeling dismissed by somebody else's way of living? But we see the effects of what's most important in one's life.

I think the clergy sex scandals in the Catholic Church, the Southern Baptist Church, and the protestant churches have been when people quit worshiping God and allowed some of what Eugene Peterson translates at the beginning of Romans 12. He says, "We can become too well-adjusted to our culture so that we fit into without even thinking." If, in our culture, we focus on the individual, we have that as one of the things we hold up as something that's incredibly important. We hold up power as one of our idols. We hold up sex as another one. You put those three together (focus on the individual, power and sex) and get outside of God's realm, and it can lead to bad places. Even folks who have said they would dedicate their lives to Christ, to following God, can get caught up in that. We could look at all kinds of other ways that we could easily get distracted and begin to adjust too well to our culture.

What I am trying to identify is that as we come on a Sunday morning, we live in a culture that doesn't necessarily support us in doing this. We could talk a lot about why all these different things are happening, why more people aren't coming to church, etc. But the point I want to think about this morning is that we just don't have that much societal support for coming to worship. It's all too easy to allow what Isaiah is talking about to happen. It's easy to come out of a sense of obligation. It's easy to come and say things with our lips, and let our hearts be somewhere else.

When Jesus was out in the wilderness facing temptation, he told Satan that one is to worship God, and God alone, and serve him only. In Jesus' presentation of his life to us, in this story, he invites us to realize that as we turn to him in faith, as we recognize the grace of God, as we're encouraged to experience the way God comes to us, we're invited to also allow that to become what is most important to us.

Isaiah puts it a different way. Why does the pot think it has the right to tell the potter what to do? If we have a creator, can we tell that creator how things should be instead of listening, looking, paying attention to what that one wants us to be and invites us to do?

Jesus, when he meets the woman at the well, suggests that what we might do is worship in spirit and in truth, to truly give God the honor, the respect, the ultimate value that God has, and to do that with all of who we are. Truth means reality. It's what's

real. It's all of us, our soul, our mind, our strength. It's an invitation, a call to worship God.

One of the things we might note is that there are lots of ways to do that. In the book that is going along with this series, there are seven different ways that she is giving us to think about. Things like celebration, gratitude, communion, a rule of life, *visio divina*, and the corporate worship service. These are just a collection of some ways we might worship, think about who God is, honor God, and come into God's presence. These are ways we think about the bowing down part of worship, how we pay attention to who God is and let God be that value that we honor, the one who shows us meaning.

I think there's one other way I would like to note. I think one of the ways we worship God is with our lives. Again, I'm going to use Eugene Peterson's translation of the beginning of Romans 12.

*Here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him.*

Our worship is not only when we come here and honor God with our presence and our singing and our praises. It's also as we live our lives, as we remember who God is to us.

Indeed, in that same Romans passage, it goes on to talk about how, as we do that, we will be transformed. It will change us and guide us, and we have the mind of Christ. I always struggle with that phrase, "we have the mind of Christ," as if we can take the mind out of Christ. It's really the comprehension, the leadership that he's showing. It's the teaching. It's the guidance. It's his life. It's his death, and it's his resurrection. He's showing us the way to life.

So what I invite you to do this week is to think about who or what we honor and hold in highest esteem as we live our lives. Also, I invite you to pick up the book, read the introduction to worship, and then pick one of those worship practices and try it a few times this week, or maybe try a couple. It's a book that's set up so that you don't have to do everything that's there. You can look for something that seems to fit your life. If gratitude feels like the right thing for you this week, work with gratitude. Or if you want to set up a moment where you focus on doing the same kind of worship we do here—read scripture and confess—that would be another option. But it's a way to remind ourselves as we go through the week of what we worship, who we worship, and how our worship affects us and changes our lives and leads us as we live our lives.

I'm reminded of what Jacob said when he was presenting the Israelites with the choice. He said, "I don't know what you're going to do, but as for me and my family, we're going to worship God." I hope we can think about and enter in again to the worship that God deserves and that changes us. Amen.