

October 26 – Joe Heikman – Wildwood Mennonite Church
(*from shared worship service at Bethany Manor*)

At some point today, chances are you'll hear the question: "So, how was church?" Maybe over lunch or on the car ride home, someone that's here with you now will ask, "what did you think of the service?"

There are a lot of different ways to answer that question. We might talk about how we liked the songs, or the quality of the singing. We might talk about how many people were there, the conversations we had before or after the service. We might talk about our favourite part of the service, how the children's story was really cute or the prayer time was meaningful. You might even talk about how funny and charming the preacher was, at least, you might if you were at a different service...

Usually this question is just small talk, and that's okay. But on a deeper level, it's a really big question: how was church? Was it worthwhile? Did it do for you whatever it was that you hoped it would do? And what exactly is it that a Sunday morning service is meant to do?

Those are complicated questions. There are a lot of reasons why we're all here; most of them are very good.

For many of us, worship is a time of refreshment, rest, and re-energizing. Worship can be a time of sanctuary, a haven from the chaos of everyday life, where we come and enter into God's presence in a way that restores us and gives us energy to "go back out there" into whatever the outside world has for us.

Others of us might say that worship at its best is engaging, challenging, and insightful. We want to learn something, to have meaningful conversation, to think deeply or to feel deeply. We want to be "fed," we want to have our understanding and experience of God stretched and shaped.

Others want worship that provides space for reflection, that refocuses us on God, that points us to God's perspective. We want to hear from God, through scripture, or music, or teaching, or silence. We want to be re-oriented, to see ourselves and our world as God sees us.

And many of us say "yes!" to all of the above, we want all of those things. All wrapped up in a package of an hour or less.

These are all very good things, and there are other needs and desires for worship that I haven't included. I think, though, that there's a deeper purpose undergirding all of those.

Doing worship correctly was a big concern of the ancient Jews. Massive chunks of the Hebrew scriptures are dedicated to worship practices. There was an entire tribe of priests and Temple workers, and the system of tithes and offerings were a huge part of their economy and society. Social norms and practices were all about ritual purity and Temple rites. The successes and failures of their harvests, the victories and defeats of their armies, the health of their people were tied to right practice of their system of sacrifices and prayers. Their national identity and history was bound up in a calendar of holy days and festival celebrations.

Right worship mattered a great deal. And so the words of the prophet Isaiah cut them to the core:

Isaiah 1:2 Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth; for the Lord has spoken:

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.

When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and calling of convocation— I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.

Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them.

So, God, how was church? Sorry I asked! The worship of Israel was not good, not at that time. Worship had become a form of manipulation. They were treating God like a vending machine, push the right buttons, put in the correct payment of sacrifices and offerings, and out pops the forgiveness or good harvest or military victory or whatever they were looking for. Worship was all about them and their needs and desires.

Now I don't know what goes on here at Bethany Manor, but at Wildwood we don't see a lot of the blood of bulls, or incense, or new moon festivals. But it's worth asking, is there anything that God might rail against in our worship? Is there

anything in our worship that has more to do with what we want than with what God wants?

And what is it that God wants from our worship?

16 Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, 17 learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

18 Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.

19 If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; 20 but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Worship is not an end in itself. Right worship moves us, it leads us to right action. Right worship cleanses us, removes evil, prepares us for obedience, teaches us to do good.

The Apostle Paul puts it this way in Romans 12:1-2

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. 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.

In other words, worship is about formation, being shaped and renewed and transformed in the image of God. Worship shapes us and forms us.

Worship is discipleship training, a specific time and place where we meet Jesus and practice following him.

Next week at Wildwood we're going to talk more about what that looks like .

Today, I'd like talk a bit more about how it works. How does our worship form us, or how *should* it form us? Two things.

First, Worship forms us by shaping our identity.

Toronto newspaper editor Benjamin Errett has written a spiritual memoir called *Jew and Improved: How Choosing to Be Chosen Made Me a Better Man*. It's the story of his transition into Judaism after he proposed to his Jewish girlfriend and decided to convert. Benjamin was not particularly religious, sort of Catholic, mostly agnostic, but he's sincere though skeptical as he enters the Jewish religion.

So Ben and Sarah start attending worship at a fairly conservative *shul*, where most of the service happened in Hebrew. That gets a bit frustrating for someone who doesn't speak Hebrew and who doesn't really believe in God anyway. So he gets a translation of a prayer that's repeated every week, and it reads like this...

We acknowledge to You, O Lord, that You are our God, as You were the God of our ancestors, forever and ever... We thank You and utter Your praise, for our lives that are delivered into Your hands, and for our souls that are entrusted to You... Thou art good, for Thy mercies are endless: Thou art merciful, for Thy kindnesses never are complete: from everlasting we have hoped in You. And for all these things may Thy name be blessed and exalted always and forevermore. And all the living will give thanks unto Thee and praise Thy great name in truth, God, our salvation and help. Blessed be Thou, O Lord, Thy name is good, and to Thee it is good to give thanks...

To an agnostic outsider, this seems “*sort of ridiculous? (he says to his fiancé) God is wonderful and God is great and we don't deserve to be in God's presence, repeated over and over again?... So you just turn off your brain? That seems kind of silly. And how immature is God that he needs us to constantly tell us how powerful he is?*

When he brings this up with a rabbi, the rabbi says that God doesn't need our affirmation: “*We're doing all this chanting for ourselves. Otherwise we tend to forget how to be humble... Humans have an enormous capacity for hubris. We love to worship the work of our own hands, something we can control; ultimately, we're worshipping ourselves. This is where the genius of Jewish prayer is apparent,*” so sayeth the rabbi. *However temporarily, it takes the focus off ourselves.*

God doesn't need our validations; the prayer is about us. Most importantly, the prayer acknowledges something bigger than us. Does it need to be so repetitive? Apparently, yes. Humility requires it. (The Jewish agnostic begins to understand worship...)

I think this is true of Christian worship as well. God doesn't need our praises, God's self-esteem isn't tied up in what we pray or how often. But our prayers and praises shape *us*. Naming God's power and goodness and control reminds us that we are *not* in control, and we should not be. Giving thanks for God's faithfulness conditions us to act out of a place of trust rather than fear. Etc.

Our worship of God shapes the way we see and understand ourselves in relation to God.

A couple of weeks ago, Irma Fast Dueck, professor of applied theology at Canadian Mennonite University, spoke at Wildwood. She spoke about the central rituals of the church, baptism and communion, and she reminded us that these are not one-time events. Baptism isn't finished when the water dries. Baptism is about recognizing that we have died to ourselves and are made alive in Christ, and it's the *living into* that reality is what Baptism is all about.

So too with communion. It's not just in the moment of eating and drinking that we are united with Christ; our unity in Christ is a constant reality that the ritual of communion calls us to remember and live out. The practice reinforces the reality.

It's like that with all of our worship rituals and practices. Our worship "in here" reminds us of who God is and who we are meant to be *all the time*. These reminders of our true identity form us by helping us to live into that identity.

Secondly, Worship forms us by cultivating right desire.

A couple of years ago, I got a chance to live out my dream of going to a Dallas Cowboys football game, in Dallas, in their brand-new 1.2 billion dollar stadium. My dad flew from Pennsylvania and I flew from Vancouver, and we spent a couple of days together there in Cowboys heaven. We did the full stadium tour, stood in the owner's box, went into the locker room, we posed on the Cowboys star logo in the middle of the field.

And then we went to the game against the hated rivals from Washington. It didn't matter that our seats were so high we could barely see the players. What mattered was the experience, being part of the crowd, wearing the jersey, feeling like part of the team. The colours, the logos, the cheerleaders, the gigantic TV screen...

Every part of that experience was designed to build my desire for the Cowboys. I was supposed to walk away completely convinced, win or lose, that this was the best team ever, that I was to follow them more closely, cheer more loudly, and of course buy more jerseys and posters and flags and barbecue grill covers and everything else. You Riders fans know what I'm talking about.

This was not just a game, it was an exercise in creating loyalty and building an obsession. It was ceremony and sacrament, in the name of football.

Our culture is very good at creating these kinds of experiences. Pick your favourite hobby, and no doubt there's a "shrine" or "worship ritual" that surrounds it and builds it up. Maybe it's sights and smells of a car or motorbike or farm equipment dealership. Or the order and quiet of your favourite bookstore. The familiarity of your favourite magazine, or the dimmed lights and dull roar of the local pub... The things we love are surrounded by routines and physical cues that enhance our enjoyment and draw us further in.

This is what worship is meant to do for our desire for the things of God. Worship is meant to take our love for God and to draw us in, to build on and enhance and leave us wanting more.

I don't mean that worship in church needs to mirror my experience of Cowboys Stadium! Worship shouldn't be about hype or marketing or production. It doesn't need to be flashy to be compelling. But worship *should* be compelling.

This is what Jesus was doing when he talked about the Kingdom of God. He told stories and used metaphors that captured the imagination. The Kingdom of God is like a treasure hidden in a field. It's like a feast where the invited guests didn't show up. It's like a woman who lost one of her treasured wedding coins.

These were formative images—they spoke to real life and filled people with a vision for what is possible, for what God intended the world to be and how they might fit into it. It invited them into the mystery of God at work in the world and themselves.

This is what we're on about in our Sunday worship. We're not "selling" God or the church, but we are intentionally bringing focus onto our relationship with God and God's vision of who we are. And this encounter with God builds our desire for

God's way of being. And as our desire is built up, we are shaped and transformed, formed into the best versions of ourselves, formed in the image of God.

Obviously this doesn't happen all at once in a single church service! But slowly, through time, repetition, and especially ritual, worship shapes us. (It shapes our identity as we see ourselves and each other through the eyes of God. It cultivates our desire for God through right relationships and a compelling vision for the way God intends things to be.)

So the next time someone asks "how was church?", hear the broader question. How did this service fit into God's ongoing project of shaping God's People? How were you reminded of who you really are? How were you invited deeper into desire for God's vision of the world?

That's probably more information than the person who asked really wants to know.... But at the very least, this is more worthwhile than talking about what the preacher was wearing... ☺

Let's pray:

(based on Psalm 51)

Have mercy on us, O God, according to your steadfast love. Wash from us our guilt and shame, cleanse us from our selfishness. Before you we are humbled, your judgment—not ours—is just and true.

You do desire truth in us, therefore teach us wisdom inside and out. Bring us a clean vision of ourselves and our world; let us hear joy and gladness, show us the goodness of discipline.

Hide your face from my sin. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Draw us into your presence, fill us with your Spirit. Restore to us the joy of your salvation; renew a right spirit within us.

Open our lips, o God, and our mouths will declare your praise. Do good in us, build in us your vision for the restoration of the world. Amen.