

Sermon: Worship Leaders  
November 10, 2014  
Wildwood Mennonite Church

I think it was a few months when Joe first asked me about preaching during this “Worship In Here / Out There” series, and specifically to focus on worship “out there”. What comes to mind for you when someone says “think about worship out there, during the week, when you are not at church”?

My first thoughts were about a quiet space, maybe some solitude, a holy time carved out of a busy day. You might think about a daily devotion, or a prayer routine that is valuable to you, maybe a walk in nature. Maybe you’re in a fast paced part of life and you use the old “pray during red traffic lights” trick. (So far there isn’t a distracted driving ticket for that – maybe do that with your eyes open.) As I first thought about the topic of worship **out there**, I thought about these spiritual moments in our day to day living.

I would NOT want to discourage any of those things. They have great meaning and value. But as Joe talked about in the first two sermons on worship as formation and training and identity shaping and so on, I found myself asking if spiritual encounters are the same as worship. I’ll leave that as a discussion topic for your afternoon Sunday School class – not whether one is better than the other – but whether they are different things.

You see I was really struck by Joe’s words about worship and community, especially in the sermon at Bethany Manor. Some of my notes from that sermon (not suggesting this is a fair summary, but bits of what struck me)

- Worship as discipleship training
- Worship as identity formation – deeply shaping in us who we are , and whose we are
- Worship equips us! for living and thinking and relating and being part of the world
- Worship lodges us with a community, within a movement, as part of a people
- Worship does not instantly change us, but happens slowly, through repetitive processes, and transforms us

A friend of mine who is very much a Bible geek was giving a public presentation (sermon!) on the topic of education and community, and in the middle of his sermon he blurted out this delightful tidbit. “The New Testament’s word for Worship means to declare allegiance.” What? When you say worship, I think music and prayers, scripture and story, fellowship and praise. He went further. “Literally” he said, and he knows how to use the word literally, “literally the greek

word means to 'kiss toward', that is, to kiss up to." What? I suppose that does actually help to make sense of worship practises you might read about in the Bible – when people worshipped idols, or other gods, or even God, you might remember stories of people bowing down, fearing, honoring, saying nice things to, respecting and pledging to protect the honor of that which they worshipped. Worship as declaring allegiance.

Now I don't generally associate a weekly trip to Sunday morning worship as a pledge of allegiance. However, just two weeks ago, Joe most elegantly wove these two pieces together. He described his trip, with his dad, to visit the team he worshipped, er I mean, the team to whom he declares his allegiance, no wait, to the team – never mind – the Dallas Cowboys. He said (and I think this brilliant):

*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. (Skipping a bit, he continued...) 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.*

Suddenly worship as an exercise of allegiance, of developing devotion, of helping us belong, of forming identity, of being a people and being transformed into new people makes a lot of sense. Participating in the group gathering of Rider Nation reinforces your devotion to and sense of belonging. I think the idea of worship as declaring allegiance and forming identity and shaping people is profound.

However... I'm about to get very uncomfortable as we start to talk about taking our worship "out there". For me, this is where I need to abandon that team metaphor. You see, when Rider Nation disperses, when the gathered community scatters, whether from Taylor field or from in front of the 72" screen, the continued allegiance is "in your face". When the commentator declares "we came to cheer, we go not to wave our flags, we have received hope, we go now to flaunt it in the face of others" – ummm.

I don't have a problem with wearing my allegiance around my neck when it comes to my favorite soccer team, and the Rider car flags and jerseys and bbq covers and cookbooks and garage doors and toques and on and on are a fun part of being from Saskatchewan, but wow do

I ever get uncomfortable quickly when people wear their Christian allegiance on their sleeves and bumpers and hats and BBQs (?). Maybe that's just my own hang up, but if the car beside me in the parking lot tells me that "God is their co-pilot" I'm actually a little worried that they are going to come over and talk to me. Of course if it's one of you I'm not worried, because I know you. I might even strike up a conversation about your driving skills. If someone knocks on the front door of my house to tell me about their faith I am oddly hesitant, on guard, maybe a little awkward or nervous. But if they are there for a fundraiser for their favorite cause, or to sell me a home alarm system, that doesn't bother me at all. But if they've come to declare their religious allegiance in my face – hmmm.

A declaration of Christian allegiance in public is a delicate matter. And yet it seems like that is where this sermon is headed. Given our current understanding of worship, what does it mean to worship "out there"? I may be a weak link here, but I'm not really ready to fly a Christian flag from my car and honk the horn after my team wins (?), or to flaunt the awesomeness of my identity and community in the face of others.

Yet this notion of worship as showing our allegiance to God, showing who we are, to whom we belong, and what matters to us in our day to day living (out there) seems powerful and fundamentally Biblical. Sometime when you have a chance to flip through your Bible (or go on the internet and do a word search for "worship" in the Bible), take note of some of the unusual places where the word worship is used. When Jesus is in the desert being tempted, the tempter offers Jesus everything they can see if Jesus will "worship him" – this baffled me as a child – would Jesus sing a hymn, offer a prayer, what did that mean? When it means "declare your allegiance" it's a profound offer. When Jonah is ID'ed on the boat in the storm as the reason for the life-threatening conditions and the sailors ask him who are you, he identifies himself as someone who "worships the Lord", and notes that he is in the process of running away from the one to whom he has declared his allegiance.

So what does it mean for you and I to declare our allegiance to God in our day to day living? What does it mean to "worship out there"? While there is a time for God talk and religious language and bold affirmations of your allegiance to God, for today, at the risk of oversimplifying, I'm going to suggest less talk, more action – less "talking God" and more acting like God is Lord. I could fly a flag or wear a shirt that tells people that Jesus is Lord, or that Jesus loves them (I don't think I could), or my actions could betray my allegiances, reveal my values, show my identity. What does that look like in life out there?

Last Sunday Ben shared with us an experience where he was verbally attacked, belittled, accused... by a Christian brother in a church context. I was particularly moved by Ben's choice of words as he shared with us his personal response. He talked about knowing who he was, about how his community (this congregation) helped him to understand that he was valued, that he was loved by God. He talked about knowing his value and identity borne out of a worshipping community. In the face of a very personal and painful attack, I can imagine that many or most of us would be inclined to fight back hard, to defend our honour, that of our friends, our church, or a worthy cause. In Ben's response I saw a clear declaration of allegiance and an understanding of identity, of belonging, of community, shaped by gathered worship, and expressed "out there".

Of course opportunities to declare your allegiance to God don't need to be dramatic, and don't need to occur in dramatic moments. I heard a lawyer this year describing his workplace as a group of people "basically doing pastoral work". That may not be your first thought about how you'd describe a law office. But he was a Christian, who hoped to act like a Christian in all his living, and was keenly aware that his work regularly put him into the midst of conflict, pain, disagreement, brokenness, and fear. And this, he suggested, provides endless opportunities for him and his colleagues to offer pastoral care. I don't believe these lawyers ever share any spiritual laws or a set of steps toward healing. I suspect in their work they probably never talk to their clients about Jesus or even mention God. But I'm going to guess that when do their work and know that their first allegiance is to God, that affects the way they treat their clients. I think people notice when they are treated with respect, as if they are lovable, as if they are neighbours. And I suspect that has an effect on people. I suspect that changes people.

When **we** are out playing with our friends, and that can mean anything – curling, biking, in the coffee shop or pub, at the cabin, the lake or the river, eating out, making music, anywhere doing anything with others, what does it mean to declare our allegiance to God? I suppose we could use words - say if the activity moves toward something you are not comfortable doing, perhaps a little sermon to your friends on what Jesus would do in that situation. Depending on your friends that might work. But sometimes declaring your allegiance to God, worshipping out there, might be as simple a choice as saying "I'm heading home".

Our regular, tiny, day to day choices around the supper table, in the coffee room, on the playground, on the computer, in the car... betray our allegiances and show our identity. When you choose to excuse yourself from the round of misogynist or racist jokes going around the staff coffee table, you declare your allegiances – you don't need to preach a sermon, or make a scene – quietly going back to work may just be an act of worship. When you choose to take

some extra time to listen to someone who just needs to talk, even if they're kind of annoying, and even if your day is really busy and now you are going to be late for the next thing, you declare your allegiance to a God who cares, listens, loves each neighbour. Sometimes being late is an act of worship. Perhaps you have a friend, a neighbour, a family member whose lifestyle deeply troubles you – addictions, poor choices, lifestyle, habits, finances – and you manage to offer that person a smile, a moment of respect, an invitation to talk or listen, surely that reveals where your deepest allegiances lie – with a God who loves, listens, cares. Sometimes a smile, even one that takes quite a bit of effort to generate, may be an act of worship. I've watched Harvey Martens in more than one context tell horrible jokes as a way of including a loner, welcoming a stranger, or bringing together people who would otherwise not have talked to each other. Sometimes a lame joke is an act of worship.

And we haven't even talked what it means to declare our allegiance to God as people who live in Treaty 6 territory, or as \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_

We worship in the world when our actions and our living betray our identity, when they show that we belong to a community and are alleged to a God who seeks peace, who works toward reconciliation, a God who offers unreasonable forgiveness, who listens, who loves, who defines neighbour in ridiculously generous terms. We worship when our devotion to that God shines through.

And so, finally, I suggest this. When we act that way, out there, in the world, to the world, people are changed. Does this change happen instantly? No. We've had this discussion – this is worship, and it shapes and transforms our communities slowly, through repetition, offering a sense of belonging.

Do you see what has happened here? When we scatter, into our worlds, we become worship leaders, each one of us. We shape conversations and communities, we influence choices and identity, we communicate that people are valuable and loved and belong. When our words and our silence, and our actions and our inactions, reveal our first allegiance to God, we worship out there.

And maybe sometimes, after days so full of worship, you may want to take a moment to also say a prayer, or sing a song, or spend some time in nature, for strength, for gratitude, to round out such rich days full of worship.

Pray: Our God, you have gifted us with the opportunity to worship in this rich community. Grant us also the courage and freedom to carry that worship with us to every place we go, and to each person that we encounter. AMEN.