

We're talking today about one of the most basic of Christian practices, worship.

Last week, for those who couldn't be with us, we talked about another fundamental Christian practice: making fresh starts. We talked about the importance of repentance and reconciliation – that God is not trying to exact something from us, but rather to lead us to wholeness in life, and that God gives us this amazing community, the church, to help us to change paths when we need to, and so that we can help one another be more whole. We noted that it is baptism when we make the promise to help each other along in faith, and it is the Lord's Supper where we are strengthened to do it.

Both of those practices of Christian faith, *Baptism*, and *the Lord's Supper*, take place in the context of worship, and so today, we are going to talk about *worship*.

Worship lies at the heart of Christian practice. Here at Morningside, we dedicate a very great deal of time to its preparation – our choir practices every week for hours. Anna spends a tremendous amount of time preparing the worship bulletins and the staff and Bill and Sanda Means proofread them every week. A full day of my workweek is dedicated to sermon preparation - and you all know it's important, so you make it possible for me to do it. Worship lies at the heart of what we do together.

And yet, I read this in an article this week: "Your most committed people will attend worship services less frequently than ever in 2015. What does this mean? Simply that people who use to attend 4 times a month may only attend 3 times a month. Members who used to come twice a month will only come once a month."¹

¹ <http://ministrytodaymag.com/index.php/ministry-leadership/culture/21459-1-incredibly-disturbing-church-trend-for-2015>

The author cited several reasons why this was the case – and I don't need to cite them here – you know as well as I do all the reasons why it can be hard to make it to church.

Let's just say that as I read them, I thought, "Well, yes... that makes sense."

If you have ever had to stare down the barrel at a decision between church and something else, I want you to know, you're not alone. More than one person has said to me, "I had to decide whether to let my child do x, y, or z, and *it's the last time.*"

There are tons of competing claims, but worship is at the heart of what we do together. So today, I want to talk about *why* we worship. Then, I'd like to add a word about *how* we worship. Finally, I'm going to take us out on a little bit of a limb and suggest how God receives our worship.



Why do we worship?

Some would say because God created us to worship. Indeed, the first question of The Westminster Catechism – pardon me for the dated language - is "What is the Chief of man?" The answer comes immediately "To glorify God and enjoy him forever."

The implication is that God is the only object of worship.

But still others would say that whatever we dedicate our time and our money to is the object of worship.

Here's Mark Twain's version of the same catechism:

What is the chief end of man?--to get rich. In what way?--dishonestly if we can; honestly if we must. Who is God, the one only and true? Money is God. God and Greenbacks and

Stock--father, son, and the ghost of same--three persons in one; these are the true and only God, mighty and supreme...²

Still others would say that we worship in order to receive inspiration and spiritual nourishment. I may have told you about a maddening conversation with my cousin once, who said to me, "Look, if I'm going to get up and put on makeup and my good pants suit, I want to hear some inspiration."

Now before I say something about that, I will tell you that I am reminded that if I point a finger at you, I have three of them pointing back at me. So here goes: it is very easy for us to consider why we worship and conclude that we are the reason. It's very easy for us to think that worship is about us.

I'll use myself as an example so that I'm not picking on anyone – some of the most important moments of my life have taken place in the context of worship and so as I look back across my life and see the high points, I see worship, I see meaningful experience, and it's easy to conflate them.

Think of it: one of the most profound moments of worship is the baptism of a child – I *love* baptisms. I don't think I've ever officiated a baptism where *someone* wasn't wiping their eyes.

Or this: we gather together in this sacred space to or other sacred spaces and we recite the promises of the Gospel to one another and offer prayers of thanksgiving for the life of someone we love who has died. It's called a funeral, and it's a service of worship.

² Mark Twain, "The Revised Catechism" 9/27/1871

Or we gather in front of parents and friends and make solemn promises to spend a lifetime together with one person, loving and comforting them, and two become as one flesh. It's called a wedding, and it's worship.

Or, we come together and pray for healing when a relationship becomes too fractured to go forward.

Or, we kneel for ordination – as our elders and deacons will do shortly – and say, “I accept that through the voice of this community God called me out for particular service, and I will do what it takes to honor that calling.” That was a deeply important moment for me - and it took place in the service for the Lord's Day.

For Christians, the deeply important moments of life so often happen in the context of worship.

And so it is tempting at times to think of the ways that worship will fill us up as being the reason for worship.

But they're not. I think the catechism has it right. We worship because God has made us for worship.

We worship *God particularly* because only God is worth our worship. Worship is never about what we get from it. It's about what we bring to God. And here is the reason why: because the minute worship becomes about what *we* get out of it, the wrong object is being worshipped.

Look at our Psalter lesson for today – God is the *object* of worship.

In other words, to put it bluntly: we worship because God is God and we are not.



So, we worship God – and only God. But how?

This is where those bulletins can come in handy. When you look at the activities of worship, make note of this: everything we do is either praising God, praying to God, studying God's Word, or making an offering to God.

Why? Because these are the ways that God has commanded us to worship. Indeed, these are the ways that Jesus himself worshipped. In fact, if it *doesn't* fall into one of these ways of worshipping God – by prayer, praise, study or offering – we don't do it in worship.

We begin with praise – I always select from the Psalms of Ascent as our call to worship – we do it responsively, and together, we identify that it is God whom we have come to worship – because God alone is worthy of worship – and then we immediately stand and sing.

A few years ago, a former congregation member came up to me and said, "I don't know if you know it, but you chastised me in a sermon once."

"Really?" I asked, "Because I don't remember ever calling anyone out by name."

"You didn't have to," he replied, "Everyone knew it was me you were talking to when you said, 'Don't just stand there holding your hymnal stony-faced. God can see you.'"

I've sung the hymns ever since – to the horror of those worshipping around me because you told me that God could see me."

We don't sing hymns because they are a kicky tune or we like the content – though it's nice when it happens – we sing hymns *to* God. *It is God to whom we are singing.* Some of the songs are straight up praise – some are invocational in nature, asking God to be with us, some are prayer – but God is to whom we sing. It's an offering.

It's an offering when the choir sings – it's not a performance. It is an offering when the organ is played – the gifts that enable musicians such as Mason to sit at an organ console, read four or sometimes five staves of music and move his fingers and feet come straight from God – and so they are offered back to God in worship. That, by the way, is why our worship isn't over until the last note of the postlude is played – because God is still listening.

Then we pray. We confess our sin. This is part of our posture of worship – there is a God, it isn't us, so we need to unload the burdens of our brokenness – and in prayer, we offer to God ourselves for healing and wholeness. That is what every prayer of confession is – an acknowledgment that we need wholeness and only God can give it.

Then we study. We are told in the great commandment to worship God with our minds. And so we read God's word, and this is why Presbyterians insist on educated clergy – then we study it – and I try not to give you the Gospel according to Baron. I try to be sure that what I share with you would stand up to serious scrutiny – because *what* we believe matters – In our Acts reading this morning, we heard the story of well-meaning followers of Jesus who had been given wrong information about baptism and the Holy Spirit. It matters *what* we believe because when we settle for less, we're not giving God our best.

And we bring offerings. And when we bring our offerings – we bring our best or else we're not worshipping God, we're worshipping something else, hence Mark Twain's quote.

As I said last week, I was asked for pragmatic ways to practice Christian faith – so here are a few to move beyond the worship hour into our daily lives:

First, pray. I know that this can be intimidating, so here's a template: it has a convenient acronym- ACTS:

Adore God – that's praise, like the call to worship.

Confess your sin – take the bulletin home with you, use the prayer there – and we won't cut you off for the assurance – you can make an itemized list as long as your arm.

Thanks – give thanks to God for what's good in your life – it's amazing what giving thank will do for anyone's outlook.

Supplication – this is where we pray for others – you can use the list at the end of Life@.

A-C-T-S – adore, confess, thanks, supplication.

Second, however you give, bring something to worship to give to God symbolically.

A few weeks ago, last year, I suggested that one way to practice offering is to place *something* into the plate – it can be a one or a five or a smaller bill – as a symbolic reminder of the much larger sacrifice that I know so many of our members give to God.

Offering is when we get to respond.

Third, study – reread the scriptures. Make a note or two on your bulletin that you want think about, whether its something I preached or Drew prayed about – or an opportunity to serve that you heard about in the announcements.

Worship is important and it can be beautiful, but it's not esoteric – it's the way we respond.



Finally, I'd like to close by reflecting for a few minutes about how God receives our worship. I will readily grant that I have been doggedly presenting worship as that which we do for God. And yet, I know very well that human experience suggests that we get something out of it as well – one of my favorite quotes is of a person struggling with her

life who wandered into church and heard the choir – I love this – *singing between the notes* – singing with everything they had, bringing all of the richness of their lives and their selves to the singing of the anthem for God – and the listener was *fed*.

And so it is with God – God takes the richness of what we bring to God and turns it around on us and we are blessed.

Does it happen every time? Probably not – remember, the prophets got one, maybe two mountaintop moments with God – we’re not guaranteed to go to the mountaintop like clockwork at 11 a.m. on Sunday – but, and this might just be the most important “but” ever – Jesus did promise that wherever two or three are gathered, to be in our midst.

So whatever you’re carrying in here – from wherever you have come – whatever you need to confess – however your offering is made – indeed, however imperfect our worship may even be – God has promised to be in the middle of it. There is no more certain and sure promise to be had.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.