

O For a Thousand Tongues
Psalm 145, Acts 17: 22-28
The Reverend Joanna Adams
Morningside Presbyterian Church
Atlanta, Georgia
February 12, 2006

Have you thought about what a strange pair of words we use to describe what you and I are doing right now? We are participating in a worship service. Worship is the singing of praises, the hearing of the sermon, the offering of prayers in a particular place called a sanctuary, isn't it? And service. Service is volunteering to work at the night shelter or to count the money after church or to tutor a child. Service is that which we do outside the sanctuary, is it not? And yet, we have missed something very important if we hear these two words worship and service as if they were opposites. The phrase "worship service" suggests really, as Frederick Buechner has pointed out "a needless redundancy," because to worship God is to serve God. To serve is also to worship. Now truly, there are two ways of doing this one thing. The first is to do what God needs to have done: to run errands for God, to feed God's lambs, to be the means by which God's compassion gets some legs and feet on it. These are things that God needs to have done. The second is what we need to do for God: to sing our songs, to tell God our deepest thoughts in prayer, to rejoice in the reality that it is God who made us and not we, ourselves.

In ancient times, the Rabbis believed that on the Sabbath day, God gave every single man, woman, and child a second soul. The soul was to be consumed in worship. There was just one problem. If the soul was not used to worship God, it turned to stone at the end of the Sabbath day and all the next week, all of one's energy was consumed in the joyless task of carrying around the heavy weight of unuttered prayers. If we never worship God, our souls may turn to stone. But if we only come to the sanctuary to sing our praises and never live out our devotion to God in the world then our faith becomes like a body without a soul.

Faith and work, service and worship. They go together in a way similar to the way breathing in is inevitably followed by breathing out. Try to do one without the other.

Perhaps if you are an Olympic athlete, you can go for several seconds, even minutes, without breathing either out or in. But we ordinary mortals will breathe in and out inevitably, always. You cannot worship without serving, and you cannot serve without worshipping.

The word liturgy means, literally, "the work of the people." In its intensive form, our work is the worship we offer to God here. In its extensive manifestation it is the service that we offer when we scatter from here and go to live our lives in the world.

We come today to the last sermon in our winter series on six of most important characteristics of Protestant Christianity. It is only appropriate that our last word is worship because the word "worship" names the activity that is of core importance in the Christian life and the life of the Christian community. We understand worship to be both a gift from God and the gift that we offer back to God. In the sixteenth century, in Geneva, Switzerland, where John Calvin lived and led the Reformed church, worship began the strong affirmation of the 124th Psalm: "Our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth." To worship is to acknowledge that God is the author of all that is. When a preacher finishes his or her sermon with the words, "In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer," "in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit," he or she is giving voice to our human attempt to know God by name. (1)

Annie Dillard, the poet and essayist, wrote, "I only know enough about God to want to worship Him by any means at hand." When we come together and engage in this ancient ritual of offering our prayers and our songs, of listening to the Word of God and making our offering to God from whom all blessings flow, when we participate in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, we are entering to the real world that lies beneath, around, and above the often artificial world and its set of values that surround us so much of the time.

I don't know why you're here, today. It's cold. I'm worried about my family that's in the path of the nor'easter that's blowing through the part of the country where they live, and I had to tear myself away from the Weather Channel to come to church today.

I think of a friend of mine, a well-regarded preacher, who tells of a day that he wandered into an unfamiliar worship service one Sunday morning. A short, balding preacher got up in the pulpit and spoke quietly about the story that the gospel tells of ten lepers who are healed and the gratitude expressed by only one of them. In the course of the sermon, my friend heard the preacher say one sentence that he has remembered for many years.

"The day of your greatest triumph is empty unless you have an altar to offer your thanks on." The tears that sprang to my eyes, my friend writes "told me why I had traveled to that place, and for the first time in eighteen years, my life began to make sense." (2) The day of your greatest triumph is empty unless you have an altar to offer it on. The day of your deepest sorrow is unbearable unless you have a place to take your grief. We cannot survive without resting in the grace of God. When we come to church, we remember that everything that we have has been given to us.

Other things happen here as well. Yesterday, at our Session retreat, our leader, who was from our national church offices in Louisville, Kentucky, showed us a clip of the television show *Everybody Loves Raymond*. In this little scene, Raymond's wife is explaining to Raymond why she goes to church. Raymond himself appears not to have much need to engage in such an activity. "Raymond, I go to church to thank God for you and the children," She says and then pauses. "I also go to church to pray for strength to get through the week with you and the children."

There are all sorts of reasons for being here. Without worship, human life can become little more than a grab bag of appetites and anxieties and self-absorption. Here, you are reintroduced to that idea that the world really truly does not revolve around you and the work you have to do. It doesn't revolve around how you are raising your children, or how you are treating your partner. God is the Maker of heaven and earth. God is the one who sustains you twenty-four/seven. In ancient Greece, a sophisticated city not unlike Atlanta, the Apostle Paul stood before an intellectual crowd who worshiped at all sorts of altars all around the city. His news bulletin to them was that there was only one God. "In whom

we live and move and have our being.” You may devote your energies loyalties to those things which have penultimate value, but there is one God who is worthy of our praise and who is never far away.

I don’t know if anyone else here can get into workaholism, but I, myself, can really get into it. The great thing about church is that you don’t have to produce anything here. Worship is not for problem solving. No products are produced here. This time and these things that we do together are reminding us that there is something, someone greater than ourselves, someone whose energy is far greater than all our striving. Perhaps the best body language we can use to express what I’m trying to say is a sigh of relief. Try it some Sunday when you get your bulletin and come in and sit down. “Whew! I don’t have to make the world go around at least for the next sixty minutes. Everything is going to be alright for the next sixty minutes.” Let your eyes move to the cross, the central symbol of Christian worship, reminding you that God has already done all the heavy lifting on for everything that is essential for human existence and for your salvation. Worship is not your duty. God is not served by human hands, as if God needs something. We **need** to give glory. We are the ones who are offering our worship to God. My seminary professor used to say to his students, “Going to worship is like going to the movies. Only there is one key difference. God, not you, is the audience.”

Because the world is marked by a great deal of chaos, I find the order of worship to be a special blessing. Some years ago, I was asked to do a small wedding for a couple, each of whom had been married before. The bride-to-be asked if I would use the prayers and ritual from the old Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship*. “My life has been marked by more than a little chaos,” she said. “Sometimes all I have had to hold on to was the ritual of the church. It became the scaffolding on which I have been able to build a new life grounded in God.”

I also find the idea of the communion of the saints to be an especially comforting thought. When we gather in worship you and I are not the only ones who are here. For example, the Sunday School teacher who taught me when I was little to sing *This little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine* is here today. I can’t see her in the flesh but I know she’s present as a member of the communion of the saints that extends beyond time and space. I know my mother’s here. I know my grandfather who I never met is here. I love

the idea of the gathering of the spiritual community. Sometimes I even love it more than the flesh and blood human beings who cough and yawn and wiggle and stare out the window and unwrap cough drops.

A father tells of asking his five-year-old son one Sunday afternoon what he had liked best about church that morning. “What I liked best was whispering to Kendra.” (3)

Koinonia, we call it. Church. Sharing with other people something that is wonderful beyond description. And somehow, the effect of it all is enabling us to get a little clarity about how we are to live and what the world ought to look like. I think of Vernon Broyles, the late, long-time great pastor of North Avenue Presbyterian Church. He was speaking one day with a young man who was obviously quite full of himself. At one point, he said Dr. Broyles, I have a lot of respect for you, but this is a free country and you can't make me believe anything. I can believe what I want to. Dr. Broyles answered, “You can indeed believe anything you want. But you cannot believe the wrong things and have your life turn out right.”

Finally, of all the things worship is meant to be, it is meant to be gladness. “I was glad when they said unto me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord.’” The Psalmist returns to the sanctuary in Jerusalem after a long absence. I am so glad to be here. More joy, more gladness. Doesn't your life need a little of both? And doesn't our grim, get-the-job-done world need great centers of praise? I'm not talking about that surface stuff where you sing that same line of praise music over and over again, thirty-five or forty times, That is PRAISE LITE. I'm talking about the deep kind of praise, the gladness that begins somewhere in the middle of your being and rises up.” I was glad when they said unto me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord.’”

A life-long Presbyterian went to a worship and music conference that our denomination sponsored a few years ago. She was about seventy-five years old. She had gone to church every Sunday for most of her life. She came back ecstatic about the experience. Her daughter said, “What was so great about the conference?”

She said, “We worshipped every night, and the service was terrific.”

“What was your favorite part?” her daughter asked.

“My favorite part was the call to worship.” (The Call to worship usually isn't the biggest crowd pleaser!)

“Tell me what happened,” her daughter asked.

Her mother answered, “Actually, the Call to Worship was the fourth thing that happened. The first thing was that somebody came down the aisle with a pitcher of water and went over to the baptismal font and poured the water so that it splashed. You could hear it all over everywhere. Then, he would look out into the congregation and he would say ‘the font of our identity.’ Then, the second person walked down the aisle carrying a Bible. She would put the Bible on the pulpit, and we would say together, ‘the book of memory’. Then, the third person would come in with the bread and wine and set it on the table. And together we would say, ‘food for the journey.’ And then the best part came. The minister would step forward and raise her hands and say, ‘People of God, welcome home.’” (4) “I was glad when they said unto me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord’.”
In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Notes: (1) Stanley R. Hall, “Essential Tenets of Reformed Worship,” *Theology and Worship Occasional Paper No. 10*, 1998.

(2) Patrick Willson, in a sermon preached at Shades Valley Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL.

(3) Paul Escamilla, “Something Bigger than Ourselves,” *Weavings*, 1995, pp.27-28.

(4) As told by Shannon Johnson Kershner.