

Growing . . . through Worshiping

September 1, 2002

Background Study

This is the fourth week in the eight-week sermon series exploring our vision for St. Andrew, which is that we are “to invite people into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ and one another through worshiping, learning, loving, and serving.” So far, we’ve examined the invitation God extends to us all, the nature of our relationship with God as fully revealed in Jesus Christ, and our relationships with others in the community of faith. This week, we turn to worship as a vital part of our lives as God’s people and as a means for our own growth and our growth with others.

Key Scripture Passage –John 4:19-26(NRSV) [This is from Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well]

¹⁹The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” ²¹Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” ²⁵The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” ²⁶Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

Worship

It is easy for us to think of worship as something we all gather for once each week. We pray, sing hymns, hear a sermon, and so on. Then we return a week later for another worship service and do it all again. But this is not the biblical understanding of worship. Our growth as the covenant people of God will not come through a one-hour shot in the arm each week! Instead, as Richard Foster says so well, “To worship is to experience Reality, to touch Life. It is to know, to feel, to experience the resurrected Christ in the midst of the gathered community. It is . . . being invaded by the Shekinah¹ of God.”² As the above passage from the Gospel of John shows, God actively seeks worshipers. God wants a relationship with us and our acknowledgement of his glory and worth. Worship is a vital means by which we grow as God’s people and enrich our lives with each other as well as God.

Our word *worship* is derived from an Old English word, *worthship*. God is the Almighty, holy and just, creator of all. He is worthy of our focus, devotion, and respect. When composing *The Messiah*, Handel’s choice for the closing chorus came from the book of Revelation 5:12-13, “Worthy is the lamb . . . to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing.” (from Handel’s libretto)

Worship and God’s people

The worshiping of God by the people of God has always been foundational to our story. Indeed, one of the commandments brought by Moses to the Hebrews was that they were not to worship false Gods (Exodus

¹ *Shekinah* is an Old Testament term meaning the glory of God dwelling with his people. It connotes God’s living presence with us, as opposed to his aloofness, distance, or transcendence.

² From Richard Foster’s, *The Celebration of Discipline*, 1978, New York: HarperCollins. This is a widely read and loved book on the spiritual disciplines. The quote opens his chapter on worship, p. 158.

20:4-6). God told his people how they were to worship him. The sacrificial system centered on the tabernacle and then the temple was part of God's law, part of God's covenant with Israel. Even God's word to them that he didn't really want their sacrifices so much as he wanted their hearts was brought to Israel 700 years before Jesus by the prophet Micah (Micah 6:6-8).³

In his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well (see Key Passage above), Jesus teaches the woman that the "hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem [the temple]." Instead, Jesus tells her that God seeks those who will worship in spirit and truth. Still today, the basic patterns of our worship services go back to Luke's account of Jesus on the road to Emmaus when he "opened the scriptures" to his companions and then blessed and broke bread with them (Luke 24:13-35). Christians have always gathered to worship through the proclamation of God's word and the celebration of holy communion.⁴ For John Wesley, worship was an "ordinary" means of grace, that is, one of the usual, non-spectacular ways in which God helps us along in our growth as disciples. Prayer, preaching, holy communion, hymns, and bible reading are all ways in which we can be drawn into "an encounter with the living God through the risen Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit."⁵ This encounter is realized through the communal fellowship of God's people and is crucial to building thriving Christ-centered relationships among all believers.

Worship as Service

Typically, the Biblical authors use the Greek word *proskyneō* to connote worship and it is used only in relation to God. The wise men bow in worship, the disciples worship Jesus. When Cornelius tried to worship (*proskyneō*) Peter, Peter stopped him, reminding Cornelius that worship is reserved for God (Acts 10:25-26).

Jesus reminds us that the worshiping of God is bound up with serving God. When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, the devil showed him the whole earth promising "All these I will give you, if you fall down and worship me." Jesus replied by quoting from the Hebrew scriptures (Deut 6:1), "Worship (*proskyneō*) the Lord your God, and serve (*latreōu*) only him." (see Matthew 4:1-11) In the New Testament, *latreōu* is most often translated "serve," but is translated "worship" more than a dozen times!⁶ Why? Because serving God is worshipping God! In the NT, *latreōu* always denotes service rendered to God, whether it is in a ministry of prayer (e.g., Acts 26:7), missionary work (2 Cor 8:18), or simply the service to God rendered by leading a righteous life (see Phil 3:3).⁷ This is why you'll sometimes hear Christians say things like "Our mission trip was an act of worship." They are right. We acknowledge God's glory and worth when we serve him. Worship includes our prayers and praise songs, but it so much more!⁸

³ In these verses, God tells Israel that he doesn't require their burnt offerings or sacrificial rams. Rather, The Lord requires that we "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God." Service to God and worship are bound together tightly!

⁴ Recognizing that there "should be a strong sense of the importance of Holy Communion in the life of the church," the United Methodist 2000 General Conference established a committee to develop a comprehensive document on the theology and practice of the Lord's Supper in the United Methodist Church.

⁵ The quote is from the UMC *Book of Worship*, p. 13. For more on Methodists and worship, see William H. Willimon's, *Why I am a United Methodist*, 1990, Abingdon Press

⁶ For example, Luke 2:37, Acts 7:7, Acts 24:14, Philippians 3:3, and Rev 7:15

⁷ From Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (abridged by G. Bromily)

⁸ One last observation. In the first centuries after Jesus, Christians stopped using the word *proskyneō* for worship because it was also used by pagans in reference to the worship of their gods. Instead, when referring to their own worshiping of the one true God, Christians used only the Greek word for serving, *latreōu*!

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

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| <p>Day 1 Genesis 8:20-22 Noah worships</p> | <p>Day 2 Leviticus 16 The ritual of the Day of Atonement when sacrifice was made for the sins of Israel</p> |
| <p>Day 3 Micah 6:6-8 What does God require of us?</p> | <p>Day 4 Luke 24:13-35 The Emmaus account. Two men meet the resurrected Jesus</p> |
| <p>Day 5 Acts 2:42-47 Life and worship in the first Christian community</p> | <p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p> |

Sermon Notes

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What are your expectations when you come to a worship service at St. Andrew? What do you hope to receive? What do you intend to give? What sort of worship service do you find most satisfying? Why? What do you think God wants from us in our worship services?
2. A recent article in a Christian Magazine had a provocative title: “Worshiping the Lamb or Entertaining the Sheep?” Do you think we tend to come to church expecting to be entertained? What do you think is most important in a worship service? What would you like to see changed about our services at St. Andrew? What do you think God would like to see changed? What can we do to help ensure that our focus is on the true worship of God?
3. As noted in a footnote to this week’s study, in the first centuries after Jesus, Christians stopped using the word *proskyneō* for worship because it was also used by pagans in reference to the worship of their gods. Instead, when referring to their own worshiping of the one true God, Christians used only the Greek word for serving, *latreōu*. How might our attitudes about service change if we see our service as an act of worship? How might our service acts themselves be changed? Why are so many of us reluctant to serve? Might this reluctance be overcome if we saw service as an act of true worship?
4. We get lots of visitors at St. Andrew. What do you think they expect from our worship services? What might we do to help them want to return?