

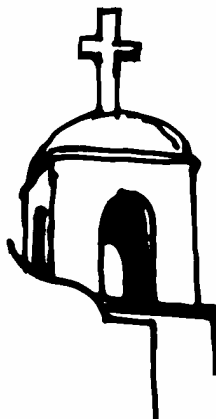
**Worship at the Core,
Part 3:
*Worship, For a Change***

Sermon by

Dr. Bob Bushong

Senior Pastor/Minister of Preaching

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First United Methodist Church of Winter Park

On the move to make a difference through Jesus Christ.

Worship at the Core, Part 3: *Worship, For a Change*
Psalm 73

When I stand up here on Sunday morning to lead worship and particularly when it's time to offer the sermon, I'm always very aware that there's a lot going on in the room. When this many people gather in one place, when this many lives are present together, there's always a lot going on in those lives. We bring whatever is going on with us wherever we go, and certainly we bring whatever is going on with us into worship.

I'm guessing that there's someone here this morning who came in here with a problem that you're not sure how to solve, and along with it a knot in your stomach that you've been carrying around with you and that you brought with you into worship this morning.

Someone else may have come in here today with a hard heart, with a judgmental spirit, an unhealthy element of pride that has taken control of you.

Another person may be sensing that God is calling you to serve in a certain way and you're struggling with answering that call, with yielding to God some other aspect of your life and not withholding yourself any more.

All that and much, much more comes into this room on Sunday morning when we gather as a community of faith to worship God.

Now, we have stressed the past couple of weeks in this series on worship that we gather for worship first and foremost to glorify God, to share with God our gratitude, to offer our gifts, to sing our praises to God, to express our faith, to offer our confessions. We worship God because God is worthy, because God is immeasurably good and compassionate and kind and loving.

We don't worship God first and foremost to get something out of it... but the wonderful and amazing thing is that because God is so good and so loving, when we worship God, when we turn our hearts and our minds toward God in genuine, sincere, open worship, something happens to us.

When we worship God, when we express our praise and our gratitude, when we open our hearts to hearing what God has to say through God's word, when we offer ourselves to God unreservedly,

- we come away filled up,
- we come away with a sense of comfort,
- or strength,
- with a renewed measure of hope,
- with a sense of being challenged in love.

When we surrender our spirits to God in worship, we become humbled before God and able to receive God's grace into our lives, precisely in the places of our lives where we need it most.

On the other hand, when we don't worship, when we don't make the decision to allow ourselves to be humbled before God, other things occur within us.

- We remain anxious about tomorrow and what it brings and those aspects of our lives that seem so overwhelming.
- We experience envy toward other people who have what we don't have – or whom we perceive to have what we don't have.
- We develop a sense of entitlement that causes us to believe that “we ought to have this or that” and that suffocates our hearts of gratitude.

- We become negative and judgmental toward other people,
- We become discouraged more easily and experience a greater sense of defeat in response to the setbacks of life.

There's no question that making a decision to worship God, making a decision to approach God with a sense of humility and to offer to God our praise and thanksgiving, our affirmations of faith in God, our confessions of the ways in which we fall short of living out the lives of faith that God calls us to live, our prayers that express the various dimensions of our lives and the lives of others, our desire to turn our lives over to God – when we make a decision to do these things, there's no question that it makes a difference in our lives. Worship does in fact change us.

One of the best examples in scripture of the difference that worship makes in the life of the worshipper has got to be our reading for this morning, Psalm 73.

Hear the first three verses again:

*No doubt about it! God is good – good to good people, good to the good-hearted.
 But I nearly missed it,
 missed seeing his goodness.
 I was looking the other way,
 looking up to the people
 At the top,
 envying the wicked who have it made,
 Who have nothing to worry about,
 not a care in the whole wide world.*

Here's an honest word of confession from Psalmist. An honest word of confession emerging from the author's sense of pride and envy and arrogance. How many of you ever deal with those very human aspects – pride, envy, arrogance? Just answer honestly within yourself. Please don't raise your hand because if you raise your hand, then I'll have to raise mine. How

many of us deal with pride and envy and arrogance in ways that cause us to look at other people with those things in our hearts?

I had a conversation with someone this past week about this very subject, an open, honest conversation between two brothers in the faith about this reality in our lives. It's a reality for many – perhaps at some level most – people in our world. It's a reality that pulls our hearts in unhealthy directions, a reality that causes us to choose our priorities from a misguided perspective.

The Psalmist writes about his perspective on folks who live lives that are totally contrary to the movement of God in the world, and yet these are the folks whom others look up to. Then he looks at his own life and his sense that he has tried to live the life that God has called him to live and it has gotten him nowhere. In verse 13, in fact, he says that his life has been “in vain.”

When we get to verse 16 it seems as if the Psalmist is hanging on to his life with God just barely, hanging on by a thread, as the saying goes. He's discouraged, he feels alone, he senses an inherent unfairness in life that is at the root of a severe case of cynicism, and he is very unhappy, almost to the point of despair.

Then we get to verse 17, which is the turning point of the Psalm. One commentator has called verse 17 the “hinge” of the poem. It's the transitional link. He is lost and disoriented, discouraged and alone, until this verse, which reads,

Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived therein.

The Message version reads, “then I saw the whole picture.”

“Until I went into the sanctuary of God,” writes the Psalmist; that is, until I gathered with the people of God in the house of worship, I was miserable.

The Psalmist is saying that it wasn't until he had consciously entered the presence of God and encountered God's goodness and mercy, until he had devoted himself to worshipping God and all that that entails – in this instance, even though he didn't feel like doing that – it wasn't until he worshipped God with genuine sincerity that his worldview began to turn around and his values and priorities were brought back on track.

Then the Psalmist goes on to write about at least three things that happened to him as a result of making a decision to worship God...

First, the Psalmist says that he was given a different perspective.

Verse 17: "I perceived therein." The Message version says, "I saw the whole picture." The Psalmist is saying that when he went into the sanctuary for worship he realized that there is more to reality than what he perceives in the moment. He got in touch with the presence of God and he turned his heart toward God and he saw the bigger picture of life, not only for himself, but for others as well. He realized anew the need that all of us have for God, whether we realize it or admit it or not, and that life apart from God, no matter how it may appear from the perspective of the priorities of the world, is not a full and complete and whole life.

He sees those who live without a sense of God in their lives in a different light. He recognizes their need for God. No matter how much they have, no matter how successful they appear, no matter what, every human being who does not know God is living a life that falls completely short of what life is about, completely short of experiencing the joy and the peace that life offers.

Second, when the Psalmist opens himself to the worship of God he is able to look inside himself, he is able to see into his own heart, he is able to understand at a deeper level what is going on within him and the extent of his own need for God.

Verses 21 and 22: “When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in my heart, I was stupid and ignorant; I was like a brute beast toward you.”

Wow – he doesn’t hold back, does he? “I was stupid and ignorant,” he says. “I was like a beast toward you,” he confesses to God.

Within the context of worship the Psalmist was able to get in touch with his own self-destructive nature.

Someone I know talks about an experience with worship that he had that was much like this. This person had a lot going on in his life. He had made some serious mistakes. He was facing some significant challenges. In a particular experience in worship he heard the scriptures read, he heard the message for the day, he received the sacrament of holy communion, he offered himself to God in prayer, and he left that experience seeing himself in a different light. He had a new perspective, not only on his situation in general, but on himself and the changes that he needed to make. This person experienced the gift of God’s grace as he worshipped that day, and his life has been transformed.

The Psalmist said that he was like a beast, that he wasn’t thinking and acting like the child of God that he was called to be, that he had become so wrapped up in himself and his tendency toward bitterness and envy and self-pity that it was ruining his life and then he entered the sanctuary and he practiced the discipline of worship and he remembered that he didn’t want to live like that.

The third thing that happened to the Psalmist in worship is that he experienced the amazing and wonderful truth that he was not alone.

Verse 23: “Nevertheless...” he writes. “Nevertheless” in this context is a powerful word. Nevertheless... he’s saying that even though his pride and envy had gotten hooked, even though

his heart was turned away from you and he was acting stupid and ignorant, even though he was ignoring the fact God claims him as his child, “Nevertheless,” he writes, “I am continually with you; you hold my right hand.”

Omigosh, what a powerful image we have here in these verses. It’s in the context of worship that the Psalmist is reminded that even though he turned his back on God through his prideful attitude, through his self-pity, through his envy of others, through his bitterness toward God, God nonetheless was right there, eager to hold his hand and guide him through the messiness of his life.

And the Psalmist ends his piece this way:

But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord God my refuge, to tell of all your works. Verse 28

As God did with the Psalmist, God calls us to enter the sanctuary to worship him. When we do that – when we come here to this place for worship – we bring with us all our stuff, all that is going on with us, all of our experiences, all of our thoughts, all of our attitudes, all of our feelings, all of our pain, all of our joy – all of us.

As with the Psalmist, when we worship God with open and contrite and grateful hearts, when we sing praises to God and hear God’s word, when we offer ourselves to God unreservedly, when we are willing to set aside our pride and recognize our need for God, God will make himself known to us. As we offer ourselves to God in worship our hearts become free to receive the grace of God that is always there, always being offered to us by God.

And we leave this place with a different perspective, with an honest view of ourselves, and with a strong and abiding sense that God is always with us.