

Good Practices for the Soul: Worship Ps. 95:1-7a; Rom. 12:1,2 3/14/21

In our increasingly secular society, where church attendance declines every year, one surprising fact stands out. More people still gather for worship each Sunday than attend NFL football games, baseball games, NHL games, and NBA games combined! Millions upon millions of us still gather for worship each week, whether on-line or in person. Why is that? In a commencement address, American writer and intellectual David Foster Wallace said this, "...Here's something else that's true. In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism... Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And...pretty much anything you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things- if they are where you tap real meaning in life- then you will never have enough... Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you... Worship power- you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay. Worship your intellect- being seen as smart- (and) you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. And so on." I'm guessing he wasn't invited back the next year!

But his point is valid. We are designed to worship; We need something around which to organize our lives. We need to commit

ourselves to something ultimate. And the idols we are tempted to worship- wealth, power, beauty, or intellect- are ultimately unsatisfying and even destructive. So, the Creator, the one who always has our best interest at heart, invites us to worship him, which sounds like a pretty good idea compared to the alternatives! Listen to these words from Ps. 95.

¹O come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!

²Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!

³For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods.

⁴In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also.

⁵The sea is his, for he made it, and the dry land, which his hands have formed.

⁶O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!

⁷For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. (Ps. 95:1-7a)

The Psalm begins with an invitation to worship the Lord joyfully in song. ¹*O come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!*)

²*Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! (Ps. 95:1-2)*

Worship ought to be a joyful experience and maybe even a little loud at times with those joyful noises alluded to by the Psalmist! That doesn't sound very Presbyterian, does it? But in the Psalms we find worship filled with singing, clapping, shouting, raising hands, and even dancing! Worship is active and participatory. One of my concerns about the impact of the pandemic is that some of you enjoy watching Sunday worship at home in your jammies a little too much! Remember that observing worship is not the same thing as worshipping! Worship requires our participation, so be sure you are participating in the prayers and songs and responses when you watch at home.

The Psalmist sees worship as a great celebration, filled with gratitude to God. He then invites us to be grateful for a couple specific things.

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⁴*In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also.*

⁵*The sea is his, for he made it, and the dry land, which his hands have formed.*

⁶*O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker! (Ps. 95:4-6)*

He begins by thanking God for the creation! Specifically, for the depths of the earth, mountain heights, the sea, and dry land. Spring is a great time to observe and remind ourselves of the wonder of God's creation! So take time to look around this season. And thank God for the gift of the creation.

The Psalmist then adds one more thing to thank God for.

⁷*For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. (Ps. 95:7a)* We thank God because God cares for us. Here, God is the good shepherd watching over his sheep, personally providing for us, for which we are grateful.

Many of the Psalms provide a good model for worship like this one, because they were the hymns of the ancient Hebrew people, sung as they gathered for worship in the temple. And they continue to guide our

worship, reminding us of the importance of giving thanks to God as we worship.

If I had to sum up worship, I would say that at its heart, it is giving God his due. God is worthy of and deserving of our thanks and praise for his many good gifts to us. And for being present with us when our lives are in the pit! Worship is giving God his due. And there's one more aspect of giving God his due that we find in Romans 12.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. (Rom. 12:1)

Sacrifices were central to ancient worship, especially animal sacrifices. Animals were brought, slaughtered, and offered on the altar to God. Paul picks up on this sacrificial image, saying that in Christian worship we continue to present sacrifices, but we don't offer dead animals anymore. Instead, we offer ourselves as living sacrifices, placing ourselves on the altar! We do so out of gratitude for God's love and mercy toward us, trusting that God will do what is best for us if we offer ourselves to him. It's part of giving God his due, for all that we are is a gift from God. One of our small group members said this week that she once heard a benediction that said, "Worship has ended, but the service is just beginning." We offer

ourselves to God's service in worship, and then live that out the rest of the week.

In worship, we give God his due, praising and thanking God for his good gifts, and presenting ourselves as living sacrifices for God's service. But there is one more issue I'd like to address today, an issue that has become even more important during the pandemic. I've often heard people say something like, "I can worship God just fine walking in the woods, or on the golf course. Why do I need to go to church to worship?" Or, "I kind of enjoy worshipping at home in my recliner with my cup of coffee. Why should I return to live worship?" These are good questions. Why do we need corporate worship?

It is possible to worship God out in creation, or at home via the livestream. I've certainly done both! And, I know many of you have regular times of personal worship with Bible study and prayer. I encourage you to do those things, but I don't believe that personal worship can take the place of gathering together with other believers for worship. For one thing, public worship encourages us in our faith in ways that private worship cannot. For example, in public worship we are encouraged as we see others commit themselves to serve God week after week. I think of Stewardship Sunday, when people bring their pledges forward during worship. That always moves me, seeing others giving God his due in that very practical way. It

makes me glad to be part of such a generous congregation! In addition, many of us use our gifts to help lead others in worship, whether that is through ushering, tech support, the security team, singing, playing instruments, serving communion, leading prayer, giving witness, or preaching. That's important, too! And, public worship raises issues and questions for us to consider that we would be unlikely to think of on our own. So, continue to worship God privately, but when you can safely do so, join in public worship, too.

This morning we add worship to the list of those spiritual disciplines that help us to grow in our faith. Presbyterian pastor, Eugene Peterson, reminds us: "Failure to worship consigns us to a life of spasms and jerks, at the mercy of every advertisement, every seduction, every siren. Without worship we live manipulated and manipulating lives. We (experience) either frightened panic or deluded lethargy as we are, in turn, alarmed by spectres and soothed by placebos... People who do not worship are swept into a vast restlessness... with no steady direction and no sustaining purpose."

Let us remain faithful in worshiping God, both privately and with others!