

Willow Glen UMC      June 19, 2016 "The What of Worship"  
Acts 2:41-47

I've asked each of you to tell me what worship is, and I'm anxious to read what you wrote. I can predict some of your responses. Few of you will quote the dictionary definition of worship: "The reverent love and devotion accorded a deity, an idol, or a sacred object" or "the ceremonies, prayers or other religious forms by which this love is expressed." [*New American Heritage Dictionary*] You are more likely to offer a less stilted definition: Worship is the communal praise of God; worship is a way to open your heart to God; or something like that.

Others won't define worship so much as describe it: Worship is essential and life giving; or worship is long and boring. I'm sure that if we have 100 people in worship on a given Sunday, we will have at least 200 opinions about it, seeing how most of us carry around lots of ideas, some of them contradictory. That's because worship is different for us

on different days or in different places or at different times of our lives.

Whatever our worship experience is, I am pretty sure that it's a far cry from what worship was for the people that Peter was preaching to in the Book of Acts. In the Second Chapter, we get just a glimpse of what early Christian worship was like.

Reading the text, can you remember a time when you were in worship and awe came upon everyone? When you were dazzled by the signs and wonders being performed, by possessions being shared, and by glad and generous hearts being fed? If we can't remember such a time or if it has been a long time, then we have to ask ourselves why is it that worship in the twenty-first century is not more like worship in the first century?

The scolds among us would say that it's because we are not as ready to welcome the message as the first believers were when Peter preached on that first Pentecost. Or it's

because we aren't as inclined to repent or keep forgetting that we have already been baptized into a lifetime of repentance. Or maybe it's because when God is passing out the Holy Spirit, we get a little scared of all that power and take a pass on it.

Certainly we are too selfish to do as the first Christians did, give up our private property and live communally. Then there's the problem that when we break bread together we often don't have glad and generous hearts and so we go away hungry.

Any of these things might be reasons why worship doesn't move us to awe and wonder more often. Or perhaps the author Annie Dillard is right that we just don't know what worship is about. She once wrote:

On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning...we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or

the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return." [*Teaching a Stone to Talk*]

And that's what worries us: being drawn out to where we can never return; having our lives change in ways that will keep us from ever going back to our old ways. But is worship anything if it is not life-changing?

Worship, as Wesley used to say, is a means of grace. It is a way for God to get in the way, to introduce us to Jesus who is the Way and who can help us change our ways. What the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Unitarian preacher William Ellery Channing said about the purpose of religion is just as true for worship: "it is not to utter barren praise which leaves us as it found us. It is to become what we praise." [1828 sermon, "Likeness to God."]

But how do we become what we praise? That's exactly why we're spending the summer talking about worship: to figure out how. There is no one answer, I'm afraid. Just look at

our world and at our history and you'll see that worship can be done and has been done in a thousand different ways.

I once worshiped at a Catholic Church in Mexico City that didn't have a roof. Part of it had caved in during an earthquake a few years before, but the occasional rain didn't stop the people from praising God, which they did enthusiastically with their maracas, tambourines, and trumpets. Another time, I attended a Quaker meeting with a friend in Philadelphia. The congregation was enthusiastically silent until at long last the Spirit moved someone to speak. I have worshiped in the wilderness at Sawtooth Camp in Idaho, where our pews were logs, our candles were a campfire and our communion was a cracker. When we were living in Marin, Hank, Kristen and I visited St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco, the church with the life-sized dancing icons painted on the walls. Not only did we have to sing a new song, but we had to learn a new dance, as all of us line-danced our way from the

altar to our seats for the teaching and then back to the altar to break bread together.

These worship services were very different but they all had some things in common. If you go back far enough, you can find the basic elements of every Christian worship service here in the New Testament, in the Book of Acts, 2:42. We don't have much of a record of early Christian worship, but we do have something of an order of worship: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." These four things—teaching, fellowship, breaking bread and prayers—are the foundation stones of worship in the Christian Church. How we put them together is what makes the difference.

As we begin to rethink our worship at Willow Glen, we have to get back to the heart of worship and rethink what these elements mean. For starters, here's my take on the basics of worship.

First of all, worship is grounded in and structured by an engagement with the Word of God. For the disciples, the Word was Jesus Christ. [John 1] But for the early Christians, the Apostles' teaching was their witness to the Word. Eventually, it was written down and now the words of the Bible point us back to the Word. So, at the very heart of worship is Scripture.

The second vital component of worship is fellowship. Worship is communal. Jesus says, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them." [Matthew 18:20] That means that Christ is not only in each of us but even more powerfully *between* us. And that power is what we feel when we sing together. For many Methodists, music is the language of fellowship, and the right music in worship binds our hearts to God and to each other like nothing else can.

So listening to K-LOVE on your car radio or watching church on TV is nice, but it isn't worship. Only when we come together do we become the Body of Christ for each other.

None of us can be the whole body by ourselves; we need every body to create the space where Christ can be fully present among us. That's why we want as many folks to join us as possible, because we can't worship very well if we're missing an eye or a hand or a foot, if we're missing you. The fellowship needs you.

The third basic element of worship is the breaking of bread. Wesley once preached a sermon on "The Duty of Constant Communion," and his brother wrote 166 hymns on the Lord's Supper. Finally, after 250 years, his Methodists are reclaiming the central importance of communion for worship. General Conference 2004 revised our official teaching on communion. In the materials created for use in local churches, it now says, "Congregations of the United Methodist Church are encouraged to move toward a richer sacramental life, including weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper...." [from *This Holy*



*Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy  
Communion]*

That would be a big change for most churches, but at least it would put front and center the truth that worship must be done not just in the presence of others, but most importantly, in the presence of God. And breaking bread together around the Lord's Table is the most visible sign we have of that divine presence.

I have had my most profound experiences in worship when I have been able to receive Holy Communion and pray at the rail. We didn't put up the rails, but we will celebrate communion again today just to remind you that every Sunday is a celebration of God's presence among us.

The fourth necessary element of worship is prayer. We usually just think of prayer as a list of joys and concerns to give to God. But prayer isn't a list; it's a life. When we pray, we are bringing together the Word of God and the presence of God

in a way that helps us bring God to every situation and to every person in our life. I don't have to convince you of how important prayer is in worship. Whether the prayers are written or extemporaneous, formal or from the heart, eloquent or awkward, prayer is one of the best ways to open up the floodgates of grace.

There you have it: the four elements of worship that we have to be careful to include in every worship service. As you can imagine, that leaves a lot of room for trying new things, because there are a thousand ways to include them. For those who are nervous about change, rest assured that we are committed to going back to the heart of worship, back to the foundation stones of our communal life together: the teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers. And before we pray, we're going to sing the song, Heart of Worship. Here's the story behind it [from [www.crosswalk.com](http://www.crosswalk.com)]:

The song dates back to the late 1990s, born from a period of apathy within Matt Redman's home church, Soul Survivor, in Watford, England. Despite the country's overall contribution to the current worship revival, Redman's congregation was struggling to find meaning in its musical outpouring at the time.

"There was a dynamic missing, so the pastor did a pretty brave thing," he recalls. "He decided to get rid of the sound system and band for a season, and we gathered together with just our voices. His point was that we'd lost our way in worship, and the way to get back to the heart would be to strip everything away."

Reminding his church family to be producers in worship, not just consumers, the pastor, Mike Pilavachi, asked, "When you come through the doors on a Sunday, what are you bringing as your offering to God?"

Matt says the question initially led to some embarrassing silence, but eventually people broke into a cappella songs and heartfelt prayers, encountering God in a fresh way.

"Before long, we reintroduced the musicians and sound system, as we'd gained a new perspective that worship is all about Jesus, and He commands a response in the depths of our souls no matter what the circumstance and setting. 'The Heart of Worship' simply describes what occurred."

When the music fades, all is stripped away, and I simply come / Longing just to bring something that's of worth that will bless your heart... / I'm coming back to the heart of worship, and it's all about You, Jesus  
Redman remembers writing the song quickly in his bedroom soon after the church's journey together, with no grand intentions, by any means, for it to become an international anthem. He viewed the words simply as his personal, subjective response to what he was learning about worship.