



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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A Sermon by Brent J. Eelman

What Makes Worship Divine?

Philippians 4: 8-9

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

As a child, I went to worship every Sunday. My mother used to brag that she never put any of her children in the nursery. We always worshipped as a family. All of this sounds good for me to say today, especially since I am a clergy person whose primary public function is leading worship. But the truth is, (from my childhood point of view), it was the longest hour of the week. As a 5 and 6 year old, I thought it was interminably long and deadly boring!

Consequently, I tried to develop all types of "survival strategies" to make it through.

- I would count the rows of tiles in the ceiling of old Second Reformed Church, in New Brunswick.
- When I was in third grade, and received a watch for Christmas, I started to time parts of the service. Pastor Schutter would offer a "general prayer" each Sunday and it would often exceed 8 or 9 minutes. The sermons were always at least 30 minutes.
- As I got older, I would replay Saturday's football game in my mind during the sermon.

Communion was always intriguing because it looked to me like they were passing out little aspirin tablets and giving them doses of purple medicine in cups similar to the ones my mother used when she gave me medicine. Could all these people be getting sick during the service?

I suspect that God has a wonderful sense of humor, because what did he do with that squirrely boy in the next to the last row in worship? God called him to be a pastor, a worship leader.

Today, I am undertaking the third in a series of six sermons on the "Great Ends of the Church." (They are printed in your bulletin.) The third great end is "the maintenance of divine worship." What makes worship divine? As a child, I could tell you what made it boring

and deadly, but the question for us today is "what makes worship divine?" 3 things: 1. Worship glorifies God. 2. Worship is genuine. 3. Worship is passionate.

I

Worship glorifies God. The Westminster Shorter Catechism asks the question, "what is our reason for being?" It answers by stating, we exist "to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." We were created to worship God. God is the object of our worship...but is our worship directed truly to God?

Soren Kierkegaard compared worship to the experience of the theater. There is a stage, an audience, and a performance. The comparison makes sense. The pews are for the audience; (some newer churches are even installing theatre seats.) The chancel is raised so that all can see what is taking place on the "stage". The choir offers its anthem for the congregation to appreciate or critique, (sometimes people clap to show their appreciation for the performance). The preacher practices his or her lines and makes sure that there is a joke or a funny story in there to keep the audience's attention.

We also pay more attention to production values in presentation, including the way the sound is mixed and equalized, the lighting, and how all the components "flow." We are also concerned that the worshiper gets something out of the worship service, enjoys it and returns again. (The only thing that is substantially different is the offering. Can you imagine passing the plate at the theatre instead of having tickets? Can you imagine selling tickets to come worship?)

The theater image makes sense to us.... But Kierkegaard turned it 180 degrees. The congregation is not audience. God is. All of us are on the stage, presenting our best to glorify God. It doesn't matter how good we might think the performance is... It is not for us. It is for God. My biggest fear is that we forgotten this and have become "consumers" of worship, as though we are the objects of worship and not God.

Preaching in worship, is a scary thing. Preachers get all kinds of comments and critiques. They run from the polite, "Good sermon" and "We needed to hear that" to lengthier letters and notes. We are critiqued for being too conservative or too liberal, too biblical and not relevant or too worldly and not centered in the Word. The preacher's temptation is respond to the audience and give them what they want so that they come regularly and keep their pledge up....We buy into the consumer/worshiper myth. After all, "the customer is always right." But ultimately, we preachers need to remember that God is also present, listening to our words... and ultimately we are accountable only to God.

Divine worship is devoted to God and glorifies God.

II

Divine worship is genuine. It is the genuine voice of God's people. It is in the language of God's people. Nowhere has this become more controversial than in the area of Music. During the last 20 years we have been reading about the "worship wars" over music. Basically it is between "contemporary Christian music" and the more traditional music, usually accompanied by organ or piano. Personally, I feel this is spurious debate. Congregations need to ask this question of themselves: "What is our voice?" What is the voice of this people of God? Good pastors lead their congregations to find their voice in worship.

When we ask that question in terms of the first point, the challenge becomes discovering the best music we are capable of offering to God in worship. Our music, like the offering we put in the plate, needs to be the best that we are capable of. It is not to fill the anthem spot on Sunday... The hymns are not book ends to open and close the worship service. They are what we bring when we enter in the presence of God. (Our best is not always perfect.)

When I served as a missionary in Taiwan, one of the things that they did there was prior to the service the people would gather for 10 minutes and practice the hymns. They would learn new ones at this time also. I asked why they did this. The answer was, "Our hymns are what we bring to God. We want to bring our best efforts. So we practice before we worship." Their music was genuine.

Worship that is genuine is also devoid of gimmicks. Most clergy (including me) have used gimmicks at one time or another to make worship entertaining. One of the things I have learned when I used gimmicks in worship was that people remembered the gimmick, but not the point trying to be made.

III

Divine worship is passionate. This passion is expressed in four ways:

1. *Passion comes from the heart:* When we are passionately in love, we respond from the emotional center of our being. We need to express this same type of passion in our worship... passion in our love for God. Passion in worship comes from the heart that longs to be union with God. The preacher poet John Donne, in his "Holy Sonnets" used the language of love and romance to describe his relationship with God. Our worship needs to have the fire and heat of passionate romantic language when we speak of our love for our God.

2. *Passion comes from the intellect.* We need to be passionate for truth. We live in an age that devalues intellect. Smart people are called "nerds" and "la-dee-dahs". The quest for truth has been reduced to how we feel, what "seems" to be true. Worship needs to proceed from our best thinking, our most creative imagination, and our quest for truth in all things.

Passionate worship celebrates the intrinsic beauty of truth, remembering that all that is true is from God.

3. Passion comes from our joyous selves. Worship should be filled with laughter. God created us with these incredible senses of humor... humor that offers self-transcendence and grace. Jesus laughed... in fact some people didn't like him because he laughed.

4. Passion comes from our deepest sorrows. Worship should also be a container for our tears. I believe that both laughter and tears emanate from the same part of our being: our souls. Both express the passion of our lives, and this passion needs to characterize what we offer to God in worship.

Divine worship is passionate. One of the great movies of our age is *Chariots of Fire*. It is the story of two of Great Britain's finest athletes, running in the early 1900's. One was Harold Abrahams, a Jew, with the particular challenges that he experienced. The other Eric Liddell, a Scotsman, was from a small Christian denomination. At one point in the movie, Liddell is asked about how he reconciled his faith with his athletic pursuit. He replied:

I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel His pleasure.

Those words cause me to shiver.... And if I might be so bold as to paraphrase them in the context of worship.... God made us for a purpose... to worship.... And when we gather together to worship, we should feel God's pleasure.

The apostle Paul, writing to the Philippians, said,

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

These are the virtues that characterize worship that is divine.. true, genuine, pure, passionate and directed toward God. When we worship we should think on and about these things. When we worship, we should feel God's pleasure. Amen.