

NOT NEGOTIABLE: Worship

In our new sermon series we're talking about the not negotiables of faith. What's a not negotiable? It's a practice, a belief, an attitude, a commitment, a something that cannot be edited out of our lives if we claim to follow Jesus.

For example, do we HAVE to wear crosses around our necks to follow Jesus? No. That's not to criticize people who wear crosses! Many, many people do, and a cross can be a powerful reminder and symbol. But it's to say whether you wear a cross around your neck does not define you as a Christian. Whether you believe in the cross, though, does. Wearing a cross is negotiable. Believing in the cross is not.

Last week's not negotiable was living with purpose and mission. It's not enough to live as a Christian two times a year, at Christmas and Easter. As followers of Jesus, we're called to live differently throughout the year. Jesus commanded us to tell the world about him - to teach and baptize and make new followers. There's no exemption from his command. We don't have a choice, no matter how many excuses we offer. It's not negotiable.

Today's not negotiable is what we're here to do this morning, what Christians around the Quad Cities and around the world are in their places to do today, worship. We accomplish a lot on Sundays. Reconnecting with friends. Expressing concern for others' well being. But ultimately we're here to worship.

What is worship? A dictionary published in the early part of the 19th century got it right: It is to honor with extravagant love and extreme submission. Worship is not compliments - it's much more profound than those. It's not casual affection - worship is intentional and intense. Worship is not public ceremony - we can sit in worship centers for hours on end and never really worship. Worship is the expression of high regard and personal surrender to something or someone. Worship is saying, you're bigger, you're better, you're holier than I am. We are not equals. You don't owe me. I owe you. You don't have to thank me. I have to thank you. You don't follow my commands; I follow yours.

Let's look at a few Bible passages. First to 2 Kings 17.35-39. These five verses summarize the relationship between God and Israel rather well....Worship is bowing down - God is greater than we are. It is offering sacrifices - a way of saying thanks. Worship is following God's commands - obedience - because God is in charge, not us.

Short and to the point: Worship is surrender, thanksgiving, and obedience.

Hebrews 12.28 says worship "with holy fear and awe" pleases God. Fear in the Bible usually doesn't mean being afraid. It usually means deep respect. Worship with respect and awe. God is greater than us, so we worship.

Then there are the first verses of Romans 12 (1-2).... Worship is surrender. It is sacrifice. Worship is living differently because God has made it possible for us to live differently.

Worship is not sitting in church pews, if all we're doing is sitting in church pews. Worship is not singing songs or hymns, if our singing doesn't express the depth of our awe and gratitude to God. Worship is not just closing our eyes to pray when everyone else does, if our intention is not to talk directly to God.

Defined as holy awe and wonder, worship is not negotiable in our lives as Christians. Defined as loyalty and surrender, worship is not negotiable in our lives as Christians. We are commanded to worship. We were made to worship. The natural order of things demands that we worship, for God is not like us. God is totally beyond us. Listen to Isaiah 55.8-9....

In recognition of the greatness of God, the otherness of God, the holiness of God, the awesomeness of God, we worship.

But there's more. In response to the goodness of God, the grace of God, the provision of God, the love of God, the comfort of God, the promises of God, worship is to be our response.

We who follow Jesus worship, a lot and often.

We started the week anxious about how much we'd have to sell in our rummage sale this week. We ended the week confident that God once again has provided. So today we worship.

Some of us have made mistakes in our lives. Check that. All of us have made mistakes in our lives. Some of those mistakes more embarrassing, more damaging than others. When we think about the mistakes we've made, and the broken, wounded people they proved us to be, and then remember that God STILL loves us, STILL believes in us, STILL has a plan for us, and STILL has a place set aside for us in the eternity we call heaven, we worship.

Not with closed mouths, drooped shoulders, sleepy eyes, or distracted minds, but with intention, and passion, and fire, and fury, and expectation. You may wonder why some people raise their hands in worship - whether when singing or in response to something the preacher says. 1 Timothy 2.8 says pray with holy hands lifted to God. But raised hands are more than that. They are a sign of acknowledgment, as if the person is saying, you're the one I'm singing about - it's you, God. You're the one who got me through this week. You're the one who's forgiven me time after time after time after time. You're the one who loves me even when I act unlovable. You're the one. I sing for you. That word I just heard was from you. This raised hand testifies to my belief in you. My raised arm says I am here for you, I am focused on you. I got out of bed, in my vehicle, and drove this place to say thanks to you, to offer praise to you, to say that YOU are my God. Of course you can say all that without raising your hands, and many people do - but raised hands can mean all those things to those who raise them.

For too many of us modern Christians, worship is negotiable. If we have time. If we have nothing else going on. If we're not tired. I AM talking about Sunday worship here, but not just Sunday worship. Worship is not negotiable on Sunday mornings, but neither is it negotiable on Sunday evenings, or Tuesday afternoons, or Friday nights, because by faith and life experience we claim there isn't a time when God doesn't provide, when God doesn't love, when God doesn't put up with us. There isn't a time when grace doesn't pierce through our arrogance, our selfishness, our greed, our bad judgment to pull us out of the mud and lift us to higher ground. There isn't a moment when we're out of God's sight, out of God's concern, out of God's passionate invitation to come home. And that means there isn't a time when worship is out of line - when it's improper to say thanks, to raise our eyes to heaven and say you're my God, your son is my savior - I have no other. You made me. I belong to you. Thanks for putting up with me. Now lead me on.

The problem is lots of us think other things are more important. We think we can toss worship out of our schedules whenever we see fit. My word to you today is that the Bible is filled with people coming together to worship. What did the disciples do after Jesus rose from the dead? They spent their time together in worship and study and fellowship.

The Bible is filled with people confessing, praising, raising their eyes and hearts to heaven - and doing so in each other's company, as we are today, and when by themselves. That means, worship is not just a good idea for us who follow Jesus; it's not negotiable.