

Maintenance of Divine Worship

Deuteronomy 8:11-18

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By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

Several years ago following worship, a church member and dedicated leader, who had served on the Session and subsequently on the Foundation Board, approached Dr. Glenn DeLange, the director of the Chancel Choir, and announced, “I didn’t like that anthem this morning.” Dr. DeLange replied, “That’s okay, we weren’t singing it for you!” His response immediately shifted the conversation from one about the preferences that we all have for worship styles to a fundamentally different idea of what worship is all about. The member then chuckled and responded, “Alright, you have me there.” What I love about Glenn is he is always clear about what we are doing here. We worship God.

Our worship is directed towards God, not one another. We all have particular preferences when it comes to worship styles but we have to get beyond our own tastes. We gather to worship the living God, not our preferences. In the words of Howard Rice, “We gather to worship God, not ourselves, our nation, our ideals, not our splendid sense of family, not our achievements or our plans. We worship the One who is beyond us, and whose ways will remain, at some level, mysterious to us. God is our reason for gathering.”¹

Worship is not primarily about meeting the needs of those in worship, though that may happen and, in fact, does happen. Worship is about turning our attention towards God. Worship directs us towards God because “Worship is rooted in the most basic of all human needs – our need for God, therefore worship is basic to what it means to be human.”²

I want to ask you a question this morning. What one thing could you do (that you aren’t doing now) on a regular basis that would make a tremendous positive difference in your personal life?³

The truth is the question is not original to me. Stephen R. Covey asks the question in his popular book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* in a chapter entitled “Put First Things First.” “What one thing could you do (that you aren’t doing now) that if you did on regular basis, would make a tremendous positive difference in your personal life?”

Deuteronomy might respond to that question with, “Take care that you do not forget the Lord, your God . . . do not exalt yourself . . . remember the Lord, your God, for it is the Lord, your God who gives you power to get wealth.” That’s why we worship! We worship to remember who we are and to whom we belong. Augustine of Hippo long ago put it this way, “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts

1 Rice Jr., Howard L., *Maintenance of Diving Worship*, (Louisville, KY Witherspoon Press 2006) p. 3

2 Ibid,

3 Covey, Stephen R., *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989) p. 146

are restless until they rest in you.”⁴ “What one thing could you do (that you aren’t doing now) that if you did on regular basis, would make a tremendous positive difference in your personal life?” How about this answer: Worship regularly, both privately and corporately with the congregation. Worship God regularly and it will change your life.

Years ago, an expert in time management asked our group to guess how many rocks he could fit into a large container. Fist sized rocks were piled next to a clear container. The group made their best estimates and then the speaker began, one by one, to place the stones into the container. When the container looked to be full, he then asked the group if more could be added into the container. Once the group was in agreement that no more could be added to the container, the speaker said “Really!” and then he reached below the table and brought out a pale of gravel and began adding it to the space around the larger stones. When the container looked completely full with the gravel, the speaker asked if anything more could be added? The group (less confident now) responded, “Probably not!”

The speaker replied, “Good!” and again he reached below the table and brought out a bucket of sand and began to pour it into the container until all the space around the gravel was filled. One more time he asked whether more could be added to the container? We were now prepared to be surprised again so we enthusiastically responded, “Yes!” With that the speaker responded, “Excellent!” and he grabbed a pitcher of water from under the table and began to pour it into the container. By this point the container was absolutely full but the speaker had made the point; much more can be fit into life than we first imagine. Just when we think it is already full, a new opportunity presents itself, or a child is on the way, or a committee needs extra effort, or an unplanned wedding gets added to the schedule. Life may feel full but more can be accomplished. But then the speaker surprised us again by stating, “The message is not that you can fit more into life but that the key to life is getting the big rocks in first!” “You have to begin with that which is most valuable; the most essential things have to go in first or there will never be room for them.”

In church, the life of faith is a life focused on the big things. If we don’t talk about what is most important in life then we’re not talking about what Jesus was talking about! Everywhere he went and with everyone he encountered, there was talk about what is most important in life. Don’t get me wrong, there are plenty of “small things” that are required in life and in the church, but we can’t “sweat the small things” and ignore the big ones.

Our faith maintains that some of the big “rocks” — some of the things that are most important to get into life first — are not the things we might think of as the most important. Worship, sacraments, service to

⁴ As quoted in Rice, p. 3

others; many in the world around us know little or nothing of these things but they are vitally important to people of faith. It all begins with worship. We so easily forget. When we ignore our need for God, we are less than we are meant to be and fall prey to all sorts of distractions in human life – distractions that we see in the newspapers and on television. “Worship keeps us human because worship keeps us reminded of who we really are and to whom we truly belong.”⁵

The story of God’s people is also our story. We have known God’s protection, God’s favor, God’s provision, God’s comfort, God’s kindness, and God’s faithfulness. Let us be careful to avoid developing a convenient amnesia, trusting in ourselves alone, grasping for anything that can secure our lives, holding on so tightly to what we own that we begin to have more faith in our things, our portfolios, our own capabilities than in the Almighty God.

Our lives, like those who have gone before us, are stories of deliverance, not of domination and power. It is especially important to remember that we have been delivered in the past so we don’t mistakenly think that we are supposed to now take life into our own hands for the purpose of making something of ourselves. We are called upon to remember the past – to remember a history of deliverance and to remember it in such a way that we actually participate in that story again and again. With an understanding that the promises and presence of God, in Jesus Christ, are enough to secure our existence – then we can live with gratitude. It has all come to us as a gift.

Life is not meant to be lived by grab, but as gift. *Not grab but gift!* When we understand we don’t own but merely “possess” our blessings in trust, we begin to live the gift and generosity comes naturally. All of life receives new orientation through the perspective of faith. “A congregation can have a fine educational program, do good works in the community, be active in support of mission partners and provide a wonderful sense of fellowship for its members, but if worship is not at the very center of its life, it is not a church in the fullest sense. Whatever else a church does, worship is at the very heart of its life.”⁶

The Ten Commandments begin with five commandments to worship God properly, concluding with “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.”⁷ And then what follows are commandments about how to treat others. Jesus summarizes them when asked what is the most important commandment, “To love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love others as you love yourself.” This is our vision statement for San Marino Community Church. It all begins with getting what you worship in life right, because it is so easy to forget the Lord, our God, and begin to think, “My power

⁵ Ibid. pg 3-4

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Exodus 20:8

and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth and this life.”

It is especially important to remember that we have been delivered so we won't wrongly begin to think that we are supposed to now take life into our own hands. Believing that the promises of God in Jesus Christ are sufficient to secure our existence, we give back, from our many blessings, to the Lord as an act of trust and thanksgiving. Sir Winston Churchill described it like this; “We make a living by what we get, and we make a life by what we give.”

Be careful to avoid developing a convenient amnesia, trusting in yourself alone and grasping for anything that can secure your own existence. Holding the things of life too tightly we squeeze the life out of ourselves. The life of faith begins with God's generosity and it continues with our worship and gratitude. Worship is a kind of collective remembering. Maintenance means keeping something alive, not trying to protect worship from contamination of the outside world. Worship can and should adapt to changing times. We worship in both contemporary and traditional ways here. All worship must be contemporary (whether we call it that or not) and every service must be traditional because it bears an ancient message and tries to make it real and relevant today.

“Not long ago, a farmer from a traditional church went into the city one weekend to visit his children and grandchildren, and he attended their church. He came home and his wife asked him how it was. “Well,” said the farmer, “It was good. They did something different, however. They sang praise choruses instead of hymns.” “Praise Choruses,” said his wife, “What are those?” “Oh, they're okay. They're sort of like hymns, only different,” said the farmer. “Well, what's the difference?” asked his wife. The farmer said, “Well, it's like this – if I were to say to you: ‘Martha, the cows are in the corn,’ well that would be a hymn. If, on the other hand, I were to say to you:

‘Martha Martha, Martha, Oh Martha, MARTHA, MARTHA,
The cows, the big cows, the brown cows, the black cows, the
White cows, the COWS, COWS, COWS are in the corn,
Are in the corn, are in the corn, are in the corn,
The CORN, CORN, CORN,’

Then, if I were to repeat the whole thing two or three times, well that would be a praise chorus.”

“A young, new Christian from a big city mega-church went to visit his grandparents and attended a small town church one weekend. He came home and his wife asked him how it was. “Well,” said the

young man, "It was good. They did something different, however. They sang hymns instead of regular songs." "Hymns," said his wife, "What are those?" "Oh, they're okay. They're sort of like regular songs, only different," said the young man. "Well, what's the difference?" asked the wife. The young man said, "Well it's like this. If I were to say to you, 'Martha, the cows are in the corn,' well that would be a regular song. If, on the other hand, I were to say to you:

Oh Martha, dear Martha, hear thou my cry
Inclined thine ear to the words of my mouth.
Turn thou thy whole wondrous ear by and by
To the righteous, inimitable, glorious truth.

For the way of the animals who can explain
There in their heads is no shadow of sense,
Hearkenest they in God's sun or his rain
Unless from the mild, tempting corn they are fenced.

Yea those cows in glad bovine, rebellious delight,
Have broke free their shackles, their warm pens eschewed.
Then goaded by minions of darkness and night
They all my mild Chilliwack sweet corn have chewed

So look to that bright shining day by and by,
Where all foul corruptions of earth are reborn.
Where no vicious animal makes my soul cry
And I no longer see those foul cows in the corn

Then, if I were to do only verse one, three, and four and do a key change on the last verse, well that would be a hymn."

It's really silly, all this bickering that goes on in churches about which music is more appropriate for worship. What is really important is to worship – in whatever way allows you to remember who you really are and to whom you really belong! Get the most important rock in your life first. It is one thing you can do on a regular basis that would make a tremendous positive difference in your personal life. Thanks be to God.