

“Heart of Worship”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
July 12, 2015

2 Samuel 6: 1-19

I’m going to test your memory now, so let’s see how you do. Does anyone know what happened five years ago last Sunday? Anyone? The date was July 4, 2010. Yes, it was our nation’s 234th birthday. It also was the date we dedicated this new sanctuary.

It’s hard to believe that it’s been that long. For many of us, this space is no longer “new” – it has become familiar and the norm for us in our worship life together. For others of us, we have known no other worship space. Several people have become a part of our congregation in the last five years, and they have no knowledge of the original sanctuary, with its brick pulpit and long center aisle and the organ that attached to the wall by two “L” brackets (and to think Lisa and I and the choir sat under that organ for how many years?).

For most churches, the sanctuary is the physical centerpiece of the congregation. It is the space that visitors spend the most time in, if they are visiting for worship on a Sunday. It’s what makes an impression on them – positively or negatively – and perhaps influences whether they will return. I had such an experience with a technician this week that came to check something out after the lightning strike from three weeks ago. When we walked in, his first words were, “Wow, this is a beautiful space!” That was his opinion, his judgment, his personal experience when entering this room. And it could be the same as others have had, or could be completely different than others have had. That’s because we each respond to sight, color, sound, and aesthetics in unique and individual ways.

We built this space to allow for all of our worship to take place in one, flexible space. Previously, we worshipped in the old sanctuary and in the fellowship hall. Now, we are able to not only have our two primary styles of worship in one space, but also combined worship and alternative worship styles work more conducive than before. It has not been a perfect space, to be sure, and we have made alterations to it since July 2010. But it has most definitely allowed us to more effectively come together and worship as the people of God.

It’s clear, though, that as a congregation we still have strong opinions and preferences when it comes to worship. Our recent listening sessions revealed that many of us are drawn to specific music, liturgy, and elements of worship. And conversely, some of us do not prefer, I might even say do not like, the other worship style. Those

sentiments are not as strong as they were several years ago, but they are nevertheless still present.

Why? Because as people of God, we are each individually fed spiritually in different ways. For some, spontaneous thoughts and phrases are what make prayer meaningful. For others, carefully constructed sentences and themes written ahead of time are what make prayer meaningful. For some, hymns of the past and the present speak of the holy in their life. For others, songs with modern melodies and lyrics speak of the holy in their life. For some, an organ, a piano, strings, brass, and other classical instruments take them to that private place of prayer with God. For others, a guitar, a keyboard, a set of drums, a rain stick, and other modern instruments take them to that private place of prayer with God.

And yet, is worship just about music and liturgy and style? I'd invite you to watch the following video as we consider that question.

(play video, "Worship - What Is It?")

I am struck by the definition of worship that was mentioned in the beginning: "To regard with enthusiastic esteem, devotion, honor and respect." There is no mention of music, of space, of clapping, of furnishings - of any of those things. Worship is offering our regard to God in an enthusiastic, devoted, honorable, and respectful way.

What is normative in our life as Christians is that we worship the one Triune God. In the passage we read this morning, we witness David honoring God through worshipping with his entire being. This passage describes David and the Israelites bringing the ark of the covenant to the new capital of Jerusalem. We read that, "David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the LORD with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals" (v.5). David was the king of the united kingdom of Israel, but that did not stop him from showing his people how to honor God. He "danced with all his might before the Lord," and offered burnt offerings throughout this parade to and through Jerusalem.

Our worship of God might be varied and different than others, but that does not give us the right to judge the validity of others' worship as it compares to ours. You even see that in our passage today. While David is expressing himself through dance and music, Michal, Saul's daughter, could not stand the sight of his worship: "she despised him in her heart" (v. 16). Rather than seeing what David was doing as worshipping God, Michal held onto her resentment of David from their past in order to judge him in the present.

For David - and for us - worship is an act that stretches beyond one hour or one day. It is a life-long exercise of offering praise and thanksgiving to the One who has given us all that we need. It is out of the center of our lives that we respond to God's claim on us as his children, and our worship emanates from that claim. We offer our

regard for God with enthusiasm and respect not just for one hour a week; we are worshipping God every minute of every day we are given to serve as a disciple of Jesus Christ. We worship God when we interact with our family, listen to a neighbor in need, mentor a child in the faith, and give of our time or our money to make someone's life better. As the community of faith, our mission to the world is reflected in our worship of God. As some pastor wrote in today's Indianapolis Star: "We seek to follow our Lord's command to love the Lord our God with all our being by loving our neighbor as ourselves. By inviting the community to come together, we yearn for reconciliation and strengthening the fabric of our common life together as children of God" (Frank Mansell III, Indianapolis Star, July 12, 2015).

As I was reflecting on worship for me personally, a couple of thoughts came to mind. One is that our preferences or opinions about worship can change over time. I remember coming out of seminary, I had very strong opinions about worship practices and what should or should not take place in a worship service. For instance, I despised clapping. I felt that what happened in this hour was not a performance like the orchestra or the school play. As such, clapping should be reserved for those settings, and not for a worship service.

Guess what? I no longer feel that way. Over time, I realized that wasn't such a big deal to me as it used to be. Does that mean I clap every time I can in worship? No - I still feel as if this experience here should be held in a different light than what happens elsewhere in our culture and lives. But I also recognize that clapping is other people's way of showing their appreciation for a piece of music, for something said, for how they were touched in worship by God's Spirit. And that's a good thing, and I shouldn't hold that against them. Just like I hope others don't hold it against me if I don't clap. Over time, our worship preferences can change.

A second thing I thought about was how music speaks to different people in very different ways - and that's a good thing. My nephew, Evan Main, is an incredibly gifted jazz musician in piano, as any of you who came to the Presbyterian Women's May Dinner heard. He has a gift that is God-given, and I am in awe of him - and others - who are able to create beautiful music, either with a particular instrument or with their own voice.

But you know what? I don't get jazz. I didn't grow up listening to jazz, and it simply doesn't fill my spirit the way other styles of music do. When Evan played in this sanctuary two months ago, I definitely appreciated his skill and giftedness. But I felt like a tourist in a foreign land, trying to interpret the words being spoken into my own native tongue.

And yet, I recognize how deeply meaningful and powerful jazz is to Evan and so many others. I see in his playing, in how he talks about

it, and how it enlivens his spirit that that style of music stirs his soul. Whether or not it leads him to a career in jazz doesn't matter. What matters is that God is feeding him spiritually in that style of music, and I recognize that and want to do whatever I can to support and encourage him so that he continues to be fed in that way.

What would it look like if we felt the same way about music and worship styles here? Do you recognize in your sister or brother in the faith that God is speaking to them in a style that is different than what touches you spiritually? Do you realize that when we all are being fed spiritually by our worship of God, we are stronger as a community of believers?

We do not worship in the exact same way we did five years ago. We don't worship in the exact same way we did two years ago. We are always open to new people's gifts, experiences, and the Spirit's leading to broaden and deepen our encounter with the living God. In what new ways will we be worshipping God five years from now? Ten years from now? We built this space to have greater flexibility and adaptability, and I look forward to how we will live into whatever the future brings.

But ultimately, the heart of worship is not solely what happens for one hour in one space. We all are called, not unlike David, to dance down the road to Jerusalem, offering our gifts to God, feeding the people, and through our lives of worship share with this world who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.