

Passionate Worship

Psalm 84

John Breon

We engage in “five practices of fruitful congregations.” God intends churches and expects churches to be fruitful, to be effective in ways that we can see. In the Bible, the “fruit” that Christians are to bear in our lives and churches includes Christ-like character: love, righteousness, and holiness. The fruit also includes more people who are becoming disciples. Bearing fruit is also a way of talking about Christian action.

Robert Schnase has looked at fruitful congregations and identified five practices that they engage in. They are Radical Outreach and Hospitality (we go out of our way to reach new people and welcome them), Passionate Worship, Intentional Faith-Development, Risk-Taking Mission and Service, and Extravagant Generosity.

Today we focus on Passionate Worship. “Worship” is when we gather deliberately seeking to encounter God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. In worship we declare God’s worth. We focus on God and offer ourselves and our actions to God. We draw closer to God.

In worship we perform some actions, but worship isn’t a performance like going to a concert or a play or a movie. It’s not that the preacher and choir or band and others up front are the performers and the congregation is the audience. We are all active worshipers. If we compare worship to a drama, God is the audience, the people in the congregation are the performers, and those up front are the prompters, helping us with our lines and actions (see Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*, Harper Torchbooks edition 180-82). Even then, God is not a passive audience. God is present and active, speaking, touching lives, healing, guiding, transforming us as we look to God, honor him and give him glory.

Jesus told the woman at the well, “The true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth” (John 4:23-24).

I love that the Father *seeks* worshipers. God's always seeking people, but Jesus says specifically that God seeks people who will worship him in the Spirit and in truth. Our impulse to worship comes from God. Worship is a means of grace because it puts us in touch with God and it's a great way to be open to God, to position ourselves to receive grace. To worship in the Spirit means to allow the Holy Spirit to guide and inspire our worship. To worship in truth means we worship the one true God and not some other god, including our own ideas of God that we sometimes substitute for the real Lord. A. W. Tozer captured this in a prayer that opens his book *The Knowledge of the Holy*:

O Lord God Almighty, not the God of the philosophers and the wise but the God of the prophets and apostles; and better than all, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, may I express Thee unblamed?

They that know Thee not may call upon Thee as other than Thou art, and so worship not Thee but a creature of their own fancy; therefore enlighten our minds that we may know Thee as Thou art, so that we may perfectly love Thee and worthily praise Thee.

In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (1)

The English word "worship" comes from an older word that meant to declare worth. In worship, we declare that God alone is worthy of praise, adoration, and devotion. Even as we declare God's worth and we glorify God in worship, we benefit from worship as well because it connects us with God. Years ago, I came across this quotation from Anglican Archbishop William Temple that sums up what happens in worship:

To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purpose of God.

(*Nature, Man and God*; <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/441116-to-worship-is-to-quicken-the-conscience-by-the-holiness>)

Our mission in worship is not to get traditional people to like contemporary music or to get contemporary people to embrace traditional music. The purpose of worship is to adore and glorify God. Our mission is to help all kinds of people do that. Worship plays a role in reaching new people—we use music and language they can relate to so they can hear the gospel. Worship plays a role in teaching people—about God, the Bible, the church, Christian living.

Let's allow the Holy Spirit to guide and inspire us so that when we worship we're open to grace and we experience grace in all the ways God has for us.

And we're talking about *passionate* worship. We need to understand the word *passionate*. One time when I was a kid, my parents and I and another couple were going on a little vacation to the Branson area. The woman in the other couple was telling her adult son about what we were going to do on the trip. She said, "John wants to see the Passion Play." He asked, "Do his parents know?" Of course, in the Passion Play, the word *passion* refers to the sufferings of Jesus.

As we talk about *passionate* worship, *passionate* speaks of intense desire and a sense that this is very important. "It describes an emotional connection that goes beyond intellectual consent bringing eagerness, anticipation, expectancy, deep commitment, and belief" (Schnase, *Cultivating Faithfulness* 25).

This is not emotionalism, where we just try to stir up certain emotions and if you don't have those feelings it's not real worship. It can be authentic worship whether we feel anything or not. But, if we come into the presence of the living God and God speaks and blesses and we experience God's mercy and grace and power and love, it's going to affect us. There's bound to be some kind of emotional response. Worshiping God involves everything about us. It's not just our minds, not just our emotions, not just our bodies, but we bring everything and give everything to worship God, and God's presence touches everything about us.

Passionate Worship isn't about a particular style of worship, but about the commitment, the passion, the energy, the authenticity, the caring that we seek and that we bring to worship.

United Methodists worship in many different styles. Whatever style of worship we have, we need to bathe it in prayer and enter into it expecting God to be present and active. We need to be committed to doing worship with excellence, giving God our best even as we realize that God is gracious and accepts whatever we sincerely offer him. We also need to remember hospitality and help new people understand what we do.

At the heart of passionate worship is longing for God. We see that in Psalm 84. The writer of this psalm describes a pilgrim on the way to the temple in Jerusalem. The ancient Jews saw the temple as God's dwelling place. Wanting to be there was wanting to be in God's presence. The psalm writer thought those who served in the temple had a special blessing. "Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you" (verse 4). We realize that God is not located in one place. God is present in all places. We are the living temple where God dwells by his Spirit. We long to know God's presence. The dominant note in this psalm is longing for the presence of the living God. Is that the dominant note in our worship?

Listen to how Lloyd Ogilvie introduces this psalm:

The pilgrim is a wayfarer or adventurer in a place that is not his home. ...We are never quite at home in any place or condition in this life. The Lord alone is our security and meaning wherever we are. Whenever things or people become more important than our relationship with [God], our hearts become fettered to false gods. Bound only to [the Lord], we are free to press on to do His will.

...A pilgrim is also one who travels to a shrine or holy place as an act of devotion. For us, that shrine is not in a building or a place hallowed because of a previous revelation of the Lord. Rather the holy place is a life in [God's] presence, under His guidance, and in obedience to His revealed plan.... (*Falling into Greatness* 117)

In worship our longing is for God alone, not for any idols. It's so easy to confuse things or people with God. In the church where I grew up, the sanctuary has several stained glass windows that depict various scenes from the Bible. It's also an old building with the sanctuary upstairs—to get to it,

you have to climb a large fairly steep set of stairs outside or go up a cramped steep and winding set of stairs inside. Sometime after I had gone away to college, the congregation decided to put in an elevator. The best spot for the elevator was where one of the stained glass windows is. They were going to relocate that window and put the elevator in its space. But the windows had been donated in memory of various people. And the window they were going to relocate was in memory of a particular family. A woman who was part of that family was a member of the church who said that they would move that window over her dead body. One day, a man in the congregation was talking with her. She was talking about how important that window was and it was a memorial of her husband's family and it shouldn't be touched. He said, "I go to church to worship God." And this is what my parents said she said: "That window is God."

In passionate worship we long for the living God. We long to be in God's presence. Sometimes people talk about inviting God to be present. But we really don't invite God—God is already present and invites us into his presence. Or someone will comment about a worship time and say, "God really showed up." If that's a figure of speech for "we really experienced God's presence," I can buy it. But God doesn't have to show up; we have to become aware of God's presence. That awareness is faith, not feelings. I hope our feelings are stirred in worship, but we don't depend on feelings. We trust that God is here and that God wants to make himself known to us. We find blessing or happiness in God's presence.

We are blessed and happy when we rely on God. "Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage" (Psalm 84:5). Where does your strength for living come from? God's people find our strength in the Lord our God. In passionate worship we find strength for the journey, for serving, for living as God's people, for loving other people. We are people on a journey. In this world, the people of God are always more like pioneers than settlers.

Our journey of faith, our adventure of following Jesus, will take us through some hard places. The psalm mentions the Valley of Baka or the Valley of Weeping. It's a dry, thirsty place on the way to Jerusalem. But those on their way to Zion make it a place of springs. By faith can we dig a

blessing out of hardship? Can we trust God to provide in the dry and desolate places? When we remember what we have experienced of God's presence, when we look forward to the refreshing presence of God, we can receive strength to get through the dry and difficult times. God sends rain and covers the dry valley with pools. And we go from strength to strength as we travel in God's presence. We grow, our faith grows and develops. God is with us in the dry valley as much as he is with us in Jerusalem. Draw strength from God's presence wherever you're struggling, wherever you feel like you're drying up and withering. Trust God to provide, to give what is needed.

"Blessed is everyone who trusts in you" (12). There is nothing better than knowing God and being in God's presence. "Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere" (10). Just a little time in God's presence is better than all the time in the world away from God. It's better to be a doorkeeper, a humble servant, in God's house than to live in the dwellings of those who don't know God. The doorkeepers at the Jerusalem temple were there to keep out people who didn't belong and to protect the treasures that were in the temple. But in the new covenant in Jesus, access to God's presence is open to all who will come. Our job isn't to guard God's presence and keep people away. Our job is to welcome people and help usher them into the Lord's presence, help them experience the living God.

The reason being with God is so much better is that God is a sun and shield, giving light and protection. God gives grace and glory, favor and blessing and the light of God's presence. God holds back nothing good from his people. So we are truly happy and blessed when we trust the Lord, the living God.

I've worshiped in many places and many styles, from retreats with no accompaniment or just a guitar and simple singing and teaching to auditoriums and cathedrals with pipe organs and orchestras and huge choirs and prominent speakers—and just about everyplace in between. At the heart of meaningful, passionate worship is the awareness, the trust that the living God is present and active. The expectation that God has something to say to me, to each of us. That God has something he wants to do in our lives in these moments and day by day. As we give ourselves to

God and as we're open to receive from God, we experience the blessing, the true happiness of knowing God. That's what we can have in our worship. That's what we can help other people have as we invite and include them. That's something we can be passionate about.