

John 2:13-22 Sacred Spaces

One of the mixed blessings of the Covid19 pandemic is that God's people now have multiple opportunities for worship every week. Not only do we have multiple opportunities, but we also literally have thousands of choices. With an internet connection or a cellphone, we can point and click our way to a church a few minutes away or one on the other side of the world. It is truly a new age for the Christ's church, and a wonderful chance for us to experience a different style of worship than what we might be used to at the church we call our own.

Even though there is great diversity and huge differences among those churches we might discover, there are some things that remain common to the church here at Millcreek. Most have pastors, worship leaders, musicians, acolytes, greeters, and ushers and so do we. They have a budget to meet and we have a budget to meet, though what we spend in a year some mega-churches will spend in an hour. They have a boring preacher, and we have a less boring preacher. They have music and we have music. Music has always been an important part of our worship of God, and today it is even more vital as we attempt to remain relevant and attractive to our modern culture.

As I mentioned in this month's newsletter, there are times when change becomes necessary. Few of us listen to 78RPM records on a Victrola or watch tapes on a VCR anymore. In fact, some listening to this message may not even know what a Victrola is. You can't buy them at Wal-Mart or Amazon.com. People who once were amazed at the scratchy sound from those little records would be in awe of modern-day MP3 players and music playlists we can access at our fingertips. Change is necessary and change can be good. The problem is that it can also be bad. Much more has changed in modern worship than music and venue. A few years ago, Robert Webber wrote this in Christianity Today:

In recent years worship has been wrenched from the story of God and has been formed by some of the narratives of contemporary culture. Many find only a cultural manifestation of Christianity that bears no mark of spiritual nourishment or sustenance. Me-oriented worship is the result of a culturally driven worship. When worship is situated in the culture and not in the story of God, worship becomes focused on the self. Certainly, from a biblical perspective, sin is fundamentally a rebellion against God, a rebellion that places self at the center. Therefore, we must ask whether it is really a fact that much of our worship has shifted from a focus on God and God's story to a focus on me and my story.

Mr. Webber's point is that worship has changed, and not in a good way. We have shifted from worship that is God centered to worship that is me centered. Of course that may not be true in every church, but there is some truth to his argument. Modern Protestant Christianity has placed such an emphasis on the need for a personal relationship with Christ that the requirement for a corporate relationship with Christ has become largely forgotten. Along with that, people today are largely uncomfortable with the Biblical concepts of holiness, sin, suffering and judgment. The emphasis has shifted away from the cross and the shed blood of Christ and the understanding that someone named Jesus had to suffer and die for our sins to make us holy to something much more palatable: the love of Christ.

As followers of Christ, we do believe Jesus is the perfect human image of God's love, God revealed to us in human form. It is right and good to dwell on the love of Christ, but at the same time we must not forget that the object of His love was the church. Ephesians 5:25: Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her. Acts 20:28 The uncomfortable truth is that Jesus gave His life on the cross for the church, not necessarily for individual believers.

Jesus is the object of our worship, and at the same time the subject of our worship. We worship Jesus because He loves us, because He did something for us and because He is doing something for us. When we worship Jesus, we worship Him as His bride, which the Bible clearly reveals to be His church. The Biblical concept of marriage, the understanding that two become one, is foundational to the relationship of believers and the church. Those that claim to be a follower of Jesus yet choose to remain outside of the fellowship of believers are in denial of that truth, and they do so at great risk. With all the choices available to us today, there are less than a few good reasons for not taking an active part in Christ's church.

If you are wondering what that looks like, wonder no more. Whether it is a traditional church in some sense of the word, or a point and click church, there are some things we can ask ourselves that will help us know if we are part of the family of God. As with marriage, there is both a personal dimension and a corporate dimension to it. Am I sharing my presence, my talent, and my treasure? Am I actively participating in worship or am I fast forwarding past the parts I don't particularly like? Am I sharing my burdens and joys with those around me? Am I growing in faith, is my hunger to be filled with God's word increasing, am I telling others about Jesus? Am I loving and learning from those among me, especially those who are different from me? That is the personal side.

When it comes to identifying a true fellowship of believers, the kind of church described in Acts 2 and Revelation 5:9, we can ask is there genuine love and a spiritual bond between those gathered?

Is the word of God truthfully and carefully proclaimed, are missional needs being met, is there a genuine concern for reaching the least and the lost both physically and spiritually? Is there holiness? Perhaps we will explore those questions on a different Sunday. Today I would like us to focus on worship.

As with the church, there is a personal and a corporate dimension to worship. We can and should worship God both personally and corporately. We have much more freedom to worship as we please in a private or intimate setting than when we worship corporately as the bride of Christ. Our music team worships differently on this platform on Wednesday nights than we do on Sunday morning. Our Wednesday worship is in preparation and anticipation of a much greater opportunity for worship, the time when the greater church will come together to praise God. Our freedom is only limited in that we need to keep Jesus the center of our worship. One way we do that is seeing worship as a journey, moving from here, where we are now, to there- a place nearer to God. Unholy things that hinder us in that journey, in other words barriers, must be carefully removed.

The Gospel reading for today reminds us of that need. In Biblical times the Jews would travel from near and far lands every year to worship in the temple at Jerusalem for the Passover. For some the journey took several weeks. It was an integral part of their faith that often came at great sacrifice. Today we grumble when we get in a cold automobile or travel snowy roads for a few minutes so can you imagine what it was like for them. With that in mind, we can see why Jesus became so angry that day in Jerusalem. As the people journeyed far across the land and entered the outer gates of the temple with great excitement and anticipation, the first thing they heard was not music or praying but “get your Passover lamb here, only three left, don’t wait until tonight”. Doves for sale, coins exchanged here at the best rate. Don’t misunderstand. This was not the mission team selling soup or cookies in the narthex to raise money for missions. It is reasonable to believe Jesus would have been the first in line to buy some of those goodies to give to his friends and neighbors. These were people seeking personal gain by exploiting travelers who had come to worship. It was inconvenient for pilgrims to travel such long distances with their sacrificial lamb or dove so there were those who offered to sell them one- at a greatly inflated price. A temple tax was also collected and because foreign currencies varied in value it was required to be paid in Jewish or Tyrian currency. And as anyone who has travelled abroad can tell you, it costs money to have foreign currency exchanged and sometimes you can get cheated.

In a way they experienced a similar kind of cultural influence on worship that we do today. To quote that article from Christianity Today again worship bore no mark of spiritual nourishment or sustenance. Though the circumstances were different, the result was the same. Worship had become more about the doves and the sheep and the temple tax than it was about the celebration of the Passover, the wonderful yet mysterious story of God saving His people.

So how do we recapture the spiritual aspect of worship? How do we get from the outer courts with praise and thanksgiving in our hearts and move to the wonder and solemn adoration of God in the heart of the temple- the holy of holies? Let me rephrase that. How do we move from discussion about whether to sing songs or hymns, whether to sit in pews or chairs, and thinking about where we are going to eat after church is over to being completely overwhelmed by God's presence in worship?

I wish I could offer you an easy answer. It is not something we can learn or teach. It is something that may only be experienced and if you are like me you probably come close only on rare occasions. However, if we want to do more than come close, reclaiming the church as sacred space will be a good starting place. It almost goes without saying that this building is sacred space, just as any other place becomes sacred where two or more may gather in Jesus name. But the sacred space is more than the building and the physical things within its walls. We will be overwhelmed by God's presence when we love the church, the entire church. The bride of Christ is the church, and that means her people, her Scriptures, her teaching, her traditions, and yes, even her bricks and mortar. Without them, it is not a church but a website.

Perhaps there are some barriers that are distracting us or even keeping us from entering the holy of holies and being overwhelmed by God's presence. This Lenten season is the perfect time to prayerfully consider what those things might be and then do what Jesus did- drive them out. We will also need to do something else Jesus did- crucify our own selfish desires and do God's will. I pray that we may find the grace and mercy to do both. Praise God we won't need to die on that cross to crucify those desires and sins. Jesus already did. Fear not and remember the words of the songwriter-the resurrected King is resurrecting me. He is resurrecting me and He is resurrecting you-he is resurrecting us, His holy bride, the church. Praise His name! Amen