

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

C: Advent 4
Hebrews 10.5-10, Luke 1:39-55

19 December 2021
Salem, Bridgeport

“What God Wants More Than Your Worship”

I want to look at our second reading for today,
because that’s what God has placed on my heart this week.
The reading is from Hebrews 10:5-10, but I want us to focus on verses 8 & 9.
So turn in your Bibles, or look at the 2nd paragraph of the reading in our worship program.

Christ said,
“You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings
and burnt offerings and sin offerings” (these are offered according to the law), then he added, “See, I have
come to do your will.” He abolishes the first in order to establish the second...”

So before we get to the heart of these verses, let’s talk about why they are important.

Let me begin by asking, “What is the purpose of the church?”
Take a few moments and give that some thought.
What is the purpose of the church?
Anyone?

Well one way that we have looked at it in our tradition, our denomination,
is to think about five areas of ministry, areas that are often represented by committees.
So what areas of ministry is the church charged with?
– **Worship**
– **Discipleship** – or what used to be called Education
– **Witness** – or what used to be called Evangelism
– **Service** – or what used to be called Social Ministry
– **Fellowship**
So 5 areas of ministry – plus the things that Support those –
Stewardship, Finance, Property,
and church governing bodies like the Council and the Mutual Ministry Committee

Now, out of the 5 areas of ministry,
which has been considered the most important in our denomination?
Worship.

Why? Because that’s what sets us apart from other faith-based organizations.
So, for example, you can have schools that teach discipleship
and you can have faith-based organizations that provide social services,
but those are not congregations.
Congregations are, by definition in our tradition, our denomination, worshipping communities.
So worship has been seen as the most important thing that we do.
And having grown up in the church, that was what was impressed upon me.

Worship was so important to me, in fact, that I became a worship leader, a church musician.
After I had worked as a church musician for a number of years,
 worship became even more important to me –
 so important, in fact, that I decided to go to seminary just to study worship.

It fascinated me.

I wanted to know why we worshiped the way we worshiped,
 where the liturgy came from, and why we still used it.

And so I went to probably the best place in the country to study –
 the Yale Institute of Sacred Music.

While I was there studying to become a better church musician,
 it became clear to me that it was really the call I had felt at age 3 to become a pastor
 that had led me to Yale Divinity School.

After I became a pastor I always worked in team ministries,
 and because I was the one specially trained in worship and music,
 I was always the one in charge of worship.

And I loved it. I loved worship. I really loved worship. I really, really loved worship.

But there's a problem when one loves worship too much.

There's a problem when one loves anything too much.

It becomes an idol.

When worship becomes the thing that divides denominations and congregations,
 when the *way* a group worships becomes more important than *why* or *who* it worships,
 then it has become an idol.

Now I want to make it clear:

I am not blaming Lutherans or mainline Protestants or Roman Catholics
 or any other particular tradition,
 because the problem goes back to the year 313

 when Christianity was made the legal and enforced religion of the Empire
 and worship became a prescribed, formal, institutionalized ritual.

I'm not even blaming Christianity,

 because if you read the Bible you will understand that Israel had the same problem.

Time and time again,

 the prophets railed against a people who worshiped but whose hearts were far from God.

But no matter how many times the prophets would preach this message,
 the people would either fail to get it,
 or they would get it for a time, and then slip back into old habits.

And so God gave up on the idea of prophets – and God sent Jesus.

Let's go back to our text.

When Christ says to God,

"You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings..."

 it's important that we understand that the words, *"sacrifices and offerings"*

 meant exactly the same thing to the people then

 as the word *"worship"* means to us now.

In other words, the exact same message the prophets preached
 is now coming out of Jesus' mouth:

"God, I understand that you don't desire or take pleasure in worship.

I understand that what you DO desire is for your people to do your will.

And here I am, not to offer you worship, but to do your will."

In some ways it's not surprising that the Jewish people didn't get it.
After all, much of their scripture laid out in minute detail
when and *where* and *how* they were to worship.
They got all of that – the *when* and the *where* and the *how* –
but what they didn't get was the *why*. And it's the *why* that is at the heart of worship.

In some ways it's not surprising that we Christians haven't gotten it.
We have 1700 years of history and tradition and ritual
that have focused mainly on the *when* and the *where* and the *how*.
We, too, have had “prophets” that have called us back to the “*why*” of worship.
Luther and Wesley are examples.
So is Azusa Street.
So were the leaders of Vatican II and the Liturgical Renewal Movement
and the Charismatic Movement.

But despite the changes brought about in such times,
it seems as if the church somehow always manages
to slip back into the robotic mechanics of worship instead of the lively spirit of worship.

Imagine, if you will, Christmas gifts under the tree.
There are some in brown paper bags, some in colorful bags.
some wrapped a bit messily, some wrapped simply but well,
and some that are wrapped exquisitely and extravagantly and perfectly –
gorgeous high quality paper with the patterns on the paper lined up to match,
with the edges meeting squarely, with silk ribbons, & with a beautifully coordinated card.

The wrapping may be interesting or not, done poorly or well, be simple or elaborate,
be cheap or expensive.

We may enjoy the beauty of that exquisitely wrapped present,
but is the wrapping really that important?

Isn't it the gift inside that matters?

After all, that exquisitely wrapped package may contain a stick of gum,
while inside the brown paper bag there could be a diamond ring!

And that's what God keeps trying to tell God's people.

Worship is simply the wrapping.

And while the wrapping can be beautiful what really matters is the gift inside.

I believe one of the reasons the Church is dying is because we've been focusing on the wrappings.
We've been worshipping our worship.

Sometimes I feel as if I went to worship wrapping school
and spent my career designing beautiful wrappings of worship.

But what the prophets and Jesus say is that God doesn't desire or take pleasure in our worship –
that there's something more important, more central, more foundational to being the Church
than worship.

And what is it that is more important, more central, and more foundational?

What is it that God desires and takes pleasure in?

What is it that God wants from us above all things?

That we love God with all our heart & soul & mind & body –
that we trust God above everything – even when it means going against logic and common sense,
and that we submit our will to God's will
even when it means giving up the things that we want so desperately.

That's what Mary did – she loved and trusted God enough to risk everything she had –
her family, her future, her very life – in order to say yes to God.
She first gave her will to God. And then she worshipped.

I'm not saying that the Church is not called to minister through worship
and discipleship and witness and service and fellowship.

I am not saying that worship is unimportant.

But what I am saying, what the prophets said, what Jesus said,
is that what God desires above all else is more than worship –

God desires that we be willing to give up any and everything that we hold dear –
our significant others, our children, our friends, our congregation, our denomination,
our ways of worshipping, our favorite traditions –
everything – even our very lives – if that is what God asks of us.

If the Church is to survive,

if we are going to do our part in passing the faith on to the next generation,
then I think we need to rethink the position that worship is the most important thing.

Because in the *Great Commission* - the *mission*, the *purpose*, the *why* of the church –
there is no mention of worship.

Jesus' last words to us are these,

*“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations,
baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”*

The defining purpose of the church is to *go* out into the world and *make disciples*,
teaching them to obey – to submit their wills to God.

More than our worship, God desires our wills.

And in order to submit our wills to God's,

we need the kind of trust that allows us to face losing everything we hold dear,
and in order to have that kind of trust,
we have to know the love and power of the living God.

It's not enough to know ABOUT God's love and power.

We must KNOW it because we have experienced it.

My prayer for each one of you

is that you will experience God's love and power in new and surprising ways
that will amaze and astound you.

And that the more you thank and praise God and tell others about those experiences,
the more experiences you will have.

Because the more we experience God's love and power, the more we will be able to trust,
and the more we trust, the more we will be able to submit our wills to God.

And when we do that, we will experience not just the wrappings of worship

but the most precious gift inside the box – the life-giving presence of the living God. **Amen**