

Great Ends of the Church #3: The maintenance of divine worship

Psalm 100

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing. Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name. For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

The Word of the Lord.

Today we find ourselves examining the 3rd great end of the church “The maintenance of divine worship”. Before we delve into what this, I want everyone to try a little exercise. A little word association. I’ll say a word and you say the word that first comes to your mind. “hello”; “blue”; morning; yes; mustard; work; rock; dog; worship.

What words popped up when you heard worship? Maybe “Sunday” or “boring” or “revitalizing” or “peaceful” or “now” or “obligation” or one of a thousand other answers. Worship is so many different things to different people. It is a time to be filled up. It is a time to praise God. To share our joy. It is a time to be inspired. It is the time when we most closely encounter God. It is when we feel safe. It is when we feel whole. It is when we feel accepted. It is when we feel loved. It is when we feel like we’re with family. It is when we feel at peace. It is when we feel most inspired to do God’s work. The point is this: we all have different images and different meanings for worship. Worship probably doesn’t mean the same thing for any one person here. So how do we find a common meaning? How do we come together to understand what the “maintenance of divine worship” means for us and for this particular church?

I suppose we could start at the beginning, in the Book of Order where our great ends came from. “Christian worship joyfully ascribes all praise and honor, glory and power to the triune God. In worship the people of God acknowledge God’s presence in the world and in their lives. As they respond to God’s claim and redemptive action in Jesus Christ, believers are transformed and renewed. In worship the faithful offer themselves to God and are equipped for God’s service in the world. “

As Psalm 100 tells us we are to make a joyful noise to the Lord. We should worship the Lord with gladness and come into God’s presence with singing. So we do. We sing and pray and gather around a Table thanking God for everything we have. Scripture is proclaimed. All appropriate things to do in worship. But things get a little sticky after that. Yes, we all want to gather and offer God our praise. We know that this is pleasing to God. We know that several times in the Hebrew Scriptures God tells Moses that after the Israelites are free they should worship God. Praise and worship are good things.

But how we choose to “do” worship, to organize worship, to “maintain” worship-what we consider divine worship- gets us in some pretty hot and heated “debates” at times. “Worship Wars” I’ve heard them called. We know that there are debates over the type of music that is “okay” to be used in worship. We know that there are committees formed to discuss the types of buildings or room set ups that should or should not be used for worship. We know that there are debates about who can lead and participate in worship. We know that there are disagreements about when we should have worship. We know that there are varying opinions about how formal or informal worship should be-if we should have a lot of liturgy or a little. These things are important-they have split entire churches, congregations, families, and friends. They do matter-to us. But do they matter to God? Does God care if we worship on mountain on Tuesday morning with a guitar or if we worship on a Saturday night with a pipe organ? Does God care if we face north and clap our hands or face south and kneel? Does it matter to God if we forget a part of the liturgy or if children skip up and down the aisles while the sermon is preached? In the end, are we still joyfully worshipping God no matter which way we’re facing and what music we’re singing and who is making a bit of noise?

Friends, many of these things that we spend so much time and energy debating and arguing over are much more important to US than they are to God. We know that how worship is shaped affects how we understand God and how we begin to encounter what the Christian life is all about. We know that our tradition and rituals are learned and enacted in worship. We should pay attention to and should spend time and energy investing in planning and arranging how we worship because it does matter, it is important. But when we lose sight of the reason we come to worship and make worship more about OUR experiences-on what makes us happy and makes this a more beautiful and holy space for us-more about what worship does for us and less about how worship glorifies God, it isn’t really worship as it was intended.

If you were asked today why you come to worship, what would you say? I suspect that many of us come to worship because it’s where we encounter God. I know that there are times in my life when I’ve left worship with an amazing feeling-I’ve encountered God in a particularly special and intimate way. We know that in the Hebrew Scriptures, God dwelt in the tabernacle-on earth because God desired to be close to the people God created. So, too, we know that God dwells here. This is God’s house. Where we come to meet God. While we know that it is silly to think that we can confine God to one place, to this space, we know that this is a place where God is. Where we can come to meet God. Come to sit with God. To wrestle with God. To praise God. To love God. A place where we can cry out to God. A place where we can find comfort in God’s promises. A place where we are together with one another and with God. And, not only is this place where we encounter God, Jane Rogers Vann contends that “the communal experience of encounter with God in worship shapes all other encounters” (Gathering Before God, 2004). So, how we meet God here affects how we meet God out there.

We know that we come to this Table to worship-like we will do today. We come together to gather as God’s family to share our faith. To share our hope. To be fed for our journey. To remember. It is at this table where we respond to God’s word and are transformed and

renewed. But as much as we find God in this place, and find that this is the place we come to worship, we need to ask ourselves, is our divine worship limited to being in the church? With preachers and choirs and formal liturgies?

Does worship happen once we leave this Table? In our encounters with God outside of these doors? Once we go out into the world? At our own tables? With our own families? Does worship happen when we sit around our dinner tables and say a prayer before eating and share family stories and listen to each other's joys and sorrows? Does worship happen when we attend one of the small group dinners held on Feb 25 and 26 in the homes of our members? (That you can sign up for in the bulletin today)? Does worship happen when we reach the top of the mountain on our hike during our vacation and we think "God, this is beautiful". Does worship happen when we take our first look at our new child and think, "God, I am so blessed. He is perfect. You are so good to me." Does worship happen when we gather with our closest family as our loved one is dying and we all cry out "Please, God." Yes, those are all moments in our lives when we are worshipping. We are with God and others. When God's presence is so close it can be felt. When we are praising God for the beauty of this earth or the miracle of birth and life. When we are proclaiming to God that it is God who is with us in even those darkest of moments. Calling out to God that God is God in life and in death.

If worship happens in church and around tables and at this Table, how else do we worship God? How else do we ensure that we are maintaining this divine worship?

Sometimes we overlook the part of worship that includes offering ourselves to God and being equipped for service. As the Book of Order so eloquently puts it, " God calls the church in worship to join the mission of Jesus Christ in service to the world. As it participates in that mission the church is called to worship God in Jesus Christ, who reigns over the world. (W-7.1002) We do this by going out into the world and proclaiming that the Lord is our God and that God is good and merciful. In spreading the Good News. In working for peace and justice. In seeking reconciliation. If we don't spread that Good News by how we live, then we are not fully worshipping God-we are leaving out a major part of what we're called to do in our worship.

Well, I think the book of Amos says it best. The people of Israel are not behaving in a way that is pleasing to God and God, through Amos, has this to say: "I hate, I despise your religious festivals; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me a burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" Pretty harsh words but words that seek to remind us of something very important. No matter what we do inside the walls of this church, if what we do outside these walls does not worship God, then we are not really worshipping God at all. What Amos is saying doesn't mean that worship isn't important. It means that God knows our hearts. As Mark Labberton puts it, "It really matters how you live in the world, how you profess and enact your faith" (Justice and Worship). And if we speak one thing and do another-if we don't walk the walk but we talk the talk, then we are not doing what

God wants. Worship is worthless-offensive even-if it isn't accompanied by action. It doesn't matter if we offer all sorts of money and sacrificial offerings. If we offer our finest things, but we don't live in a way that pleases God, then we are not praising God. So, if we are to divinely worship, we are to establish justice and work for peace where we live. Where we work. Where we worship. We are to worship God in all we do. In who we are. In how we live.

So if we are to maintain divine worship it must first and foremost be about God. And secondly, as part of our worship we are called to leave worship and to live a life that worships God by spreading the love of Christ in the world.

So, friends, let us seek to worship God with not only with our voices in song and prayer but with our feet and hands in action. Let our lives be an act of worship to God. Let how we love others be an act of worship to God. Let us offer our actions to create justice as our worship to God.

AMEN