

What is the worship God Loves?

John 4:21-24; Colossians 3:14-17

Today's sermon is dedicated to LeAnda and our music ministry, the title? "What is the Worship God Loves?" I have preached more than once on the worship God hates, all based on the Hebrew prophets' challenge to God's people who loved to go to worship but who turned away from God's instruction on how to live, especially concerning justice and compassion and caring for the most vulnerable in the nation. But today let's think about the worship God loves.

I

The Jewish scholar Arthur Green, in his book *Judaism for the World*, writes:

The "pleasure" God takes in human worship needs to be understood in terms of the human goodness and love brought forth in the worshipper and in the religious community.¹

This is the biblical vision. God doesn't "need" our worship for God's own sake, as if God were the Narcissist in Chief. We worship for our sakes and for the sake of the world.

I love Frederick Buechner's paragraph on worship. Phrases like Worship Service or Service of Worship, he says, are redundant:

To worship God *means* to serve him. Basically, there are two ways to do it. One way is to do things for him that he needs to have done—run errands for him, carry messages for him, fight on his side, feed his lambs, and so on. The other way is to do things for him that you need to do—sing songs for him, create beautiful things for him, give things up for him, tell him what's on your mind and in your heart, generally rejoice in him and make a fool of yourself for him, the way lovers have always made fools of themselves for the one they love.²

The prophets were saying that true worship combines the love of God and the love of neighbor; otherwise it's just so much patting yourself on the back for being religious.

II

Worship is bringing your whole self to God, all of who you are for God's healing, comfort and guidance.

A couple of Sundays ago the choir sang a beautiful anthem, "God of the Sparrow." There's a new hymn I love called "God of the Sparrow God of the Whale." It sings the key questions of worship:

God of the sparrow

God of the whale

God of the swirling stars

How does the creature say Awe

How does the creature say Praise?

God of the earthquake

God of the storm

God of the trumpet blast

How does the creature cry Woe

How does the creature cry Save?

God of the rainbow

God of the cross

God of the empty grave

How does the creature say Grace

How does the creature say Thanks?

God of the hungry

God of the sick

God of the prodigal

How does the creature say Care

How does the creature say Life?

God of the neighbor

God of the foe

God of the pruning hook

How does the creature say Love

How does the creature say Peace?

God of the ages

God near at hand

God of the loving heart

How do your children say Joy

How do your children say Home?

(Jaroslav Vajda)

We bring our whole selves and all we cry to God, Awe, Praise, Woe, Save, Grace,
Thanks, Care, Life, Love, Peace, Joy, Home.

III

So now we turn on this special day to the holy calling of music in worship.
At its heart the role of music in worship is to help us bring all of who we are to
God, our praise and thanksgiving, our joy and delight, our sorrows and fears, our
confessions, our need and the needs of the world, our courage and commitment

and the deepest offering of the self. Words aren't enough. We need the sacred gift of music.

Paul wrote:

...the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit...intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.

(Romans 8:26)

The Spirit uses music to help us worship to express the things too deep for words.

Soren Kierkegaard's model for worship re-depicts our normal way of thinking about worship. Often, he said, people go to worship like theatre goers go to a play. The actors are the ones on the stage, the people attending are the audience, and there are the prompters just off stage helping the actors say their right lines. But that is all wrong, he said. In true worship, *God* is the audience, the *worshippers* are the actors on stage and the *worship leaders*, those who pray and preach and sing in the choir and the choir director, the pianist, these are the prompters helping the worshippers say their right lines to God, that is the lines we each most need to say to God.

That's the holy calling of worship leaders, the preacher and pray-er, the singers in the choir, the choral director, the instrumentalists, we are the prompters helping the congregation bring all they most need to bring to God, bring it to God.

And music is so important in this role. Instrumental music, whether the Prelude or Offertory or Postlude, helps us with its beautiful voice bring our whole selves to God. The Prelude helps us make the transition from the every day world into the sacred world and sacred time of worship. It helps open the door and ushers us into worship. The Offertory leads us more deeply into worship and helps us ponder what we need to offer God. The Postlude is a Sending Forth into the world with God's love.

In the *Chronicles of Narnia*, when the children reach Narnia, one of them runs ahead crying, "Further in and higher up!" That's the role of the worship leader.

And the choral music! The choral music! What would we do without our wonderful choir? Today and across our 50 plus years? The choir helps us bring our whole self to God by the holy alchemy of words and music brought together to move us further in and higher up, to help the mind descend into the heart, to illumine the words of scripture.

St. Augustine once said: "To sing is to pray twice!" Once with the mind, the other with the heart, once with words, then in ways too deep for words.

I was blessed beyond words to have been the son of a music minister. I sang in choirs from children's choirs of all ages to youth choir. I learned the love of

poetry in the anthems and songs. I let scripture sink in at a deeper level as I sang scripture. There were some pieces of music in which I learned and sang all four parts as my voice changed: soprano, then alto, then tenor, then bass.

But there was something else that happened. Church music saved me from the literalism of Southern Baptist religion. I discovered that the words, all of them, pointed to something beyond, deeper and higher. I didn't get stuck on the literal meanings of the words. Sometimes God was a poet, a singer. Our thoughts, words about God were, to use the Buddhist image, *a finger pointing to the moon, not the moon itself*. Through my years I've worshipped in all kinds of churches, with worship high and low, as some put it, worship formal and informal and with music from Bach to Beatles, with prayers carefully written and extemporaneous, some using ancient prayers, others like Chris a couple of weeks ago, with the lyrics of Jimmy Buffett.

I've worshipped with music ancient and new, "praise and worship" music, black spirituals and songs, the chanting of psalms at a monastery, and instrumental music for the times there were just no words. I have loved them all.

The *forms* of worship and its music do not matter—what matters is if they help us bring our authentic, real self to worship and offer it to God. What matters is if the form of worship increases the love of God and neighbor.

IV

I think that's what is going on in the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:21-24). She was a Samaritan who worshipped in Samaritan ways. Jesus was a Jew who worshipped in his Jewish ways. Her worship was centered on Mount Gerizim, his in the temple in Jerusalem.

There were worship wars then as today where people go to war defending their way of worship and putting down the ways others worship. Our arguments over worship are our attempts to be separate and superior to other people and other churches.

But listen to this conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman.

The woman says to Jesus:

Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain; and you say that Jerusalem is where people ought to worship.

Jesus answered:

The hour is coming and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the *Abba* in spirit and in truth...God is spirit, and those who worship, worship in spirit and in truth.

What might this mean, "in spirit and in truth"?

“In truth” means we speak the best truth we can know, about ourselves and our world. We *seek* truth as a form of worship. We seek to love God with all our minds too. We tell the truth in worship.

“In spirit” means we can worship God anywhere and everywhere. When and wherever God’s spirit and our spirit dwell together, there is worship. God is not a tribal deity with one holy place. Everything is holy. Anywhere can be holy. In a church sanctuary, beneath the stars, on the top of a mountain, or by a stream, in a private place at home or in your garden.

Some people love to dictate for others the one true place or style of worship. Jesus had other ideas. He knew well about religious feuds and worship wars.

Paul agreed and made a special place for music in worship:

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God. (Colossians 3: 14-17)

V

Andre Dubus was a wonderful short fiction writer. In one story there was a stable owner named Luke Ripley. Every morning he awoke at 4:45 for an hour of contemplation and conversation with God. Then he had breakfast, went to the

stable to feed the horses, then rode his horse down the road to the small Catholic church to have morning Mass with Father Paul and the five or six regulars.

This daily routine taught him, in his words, “the necessity and wonder of ritual.” Or, as I would phrase it today, *the necessity and wonder of worship and its music*. This is how he described it:

...for ritual allows those who cannot will themselves out of the secular to perform the spiritual, as dancing allows the tongue-tied man a ceremony of love.³

Our hearts are so fickle, our tongues are so tied, but worship and its music allow us tongue-tied folk our ceremony of love.

Sometimes we are going along in worship on automatic pilot. But here comes a song, a tune, an anthem, a hymn, and there comes a tear, a lump in the throat, a surge of hope, an indwelling peace, a new resolve. Thanks be to God for the gift of music in worship.

1. Arthur Green, *Judaism for the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 13.

2. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (N.Y.: Harper&Row, 1973), 97-8.

3. Andre Dubus, "A Father's Story", *The Times are Never So Bad* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1983),165.