

Advent Lutheran Church
Connecting with God
September 15, 2024
Romans 12:1-2 & John 4:19-24

Let's go to church! Only, imagine that the year is 1950-something or 1960-something or if you are unable to imagine a time that long ago, 1970-something will do. Back then, for most folks, going to church started at home with wardrobe selection. In fact, back in the day there was a special category of clothing known as Sunday best. Whether you were a child, youth, or adult going to church meant you would be dressing up.

Let's go to worship! Only now imagine the year is 80-something or 90-something – no, not 1980 or 1990 but rather AD 80 or AD 90 – the time just before the Gospel of John was written. Back then folks knew that going to worship meant going to the right sacred place.

The Samaritan woman in this morning's Gospel lesson asks Jesus whether or not they are standing on holy ground. She's basically asking him, "so tell me who gets it right – the Samaritans or the Jews? Are we to worship here on Mount Gerizim or are we supposed to go to Jerusalem?"

Surely if Jesus is a prophet he'll give the right answer.

Jesus, however, isn't interested in taking the bait. He won't directly answer her question not because he doesn't care, but because he wants to break this binary way of thinking. He wants to shift her focus and ours.

So . . . Jesus, should we worship here or there?

Jesus, should we worship in our Sunday best or will any outfit do?

And Jesus responds, times are changing. I'm here to let you know that where you go to worship no longer matters. What you wear

to worship no longer matters. I'm not concerned with these minor details, but rather I invite you to focus on the one you worship.¹

Think about this: God is Spirit, which means that God is not bound to any single place; God can be known and worshipped in every place.

Could it be that we – centuries ago, decades ago, and even moments ago – have tried to create rules that diminish the divine? Could it be that we tend to remake God into our image rather than remembering that God made us in God's own image? Could it be that we regularly make these mistakes in worship?

In this week's Roundtable the wide-ranging conversation included several mentions of personal preference. Does it surprise you to learn that some people valued excellence in worship? Or does it surprise you to know that while everyone is showing up for our blended worship service many actually prefer traditional worship?

For the last several days I've been in Minneapolis alongside a diverse group of clergy from all across the United States. We were frankly an unlikely group to come together given our theological, geographical, and ethnic diversity and yet we came together to explore the Way of Jesus for today.

Interestingly, our first session was led by the Rev. Tyler Sit, a queer United Methodist pastor who serves as the founding pastor of New City Church in Minneapolis.

New City started as a small group in someone's home and changed venues multiple times as it grew into a church. It is now the first new United Methodist congregation in Minnesota to become self-supporting in a long time. And, it's a much more diverse worshipping community than Advent or than most of us have ever experienced, which made Pastor Tyler a good choice to set the tone for all that would follow.

¹ The Message, for example, renders v.23 in this way: "But the time is coming—it has, in fact, come—when what you're called will not matter and where you go to worship will not matter."

A few years ago, he wrote a book called *Staying Awake*. In the chapter on worship, he writes:

I'm convinced worship is the foundational habit for people who are following Jesus. And in some ways I wish it weren't. Worship is inconvenient . . .²

Worship is why you are here this morning. And despite us having gathered together for this experience on a weekly basis since I started as your interim pastor I've not yet had a single person come up to me and proudly announce that they are excited to be here this morning so that they can worship in spirit and truth.

I've also not had anyone describe our shared Sunday morning experience as passionate worship. This is, however, the language used by Bishop Schnase – the author of the book that inspired our current sermon series. The Bishop explains:

Why use passionate to describe the practices of fruitful churches? Without passion, worship becomes dry, routine, boring, and predictable, keeping the form while lacking the spirit.³

And, yet, there is no one right recipe for passionate worship. Bishop Schnase gives examples of what this looks like in local congregations. He alerts us that it moves beyond the intellectual to create an emotional connection. And he names passionate worship as worship that is “alive, authentic, fresh, and engaging.”

Perhaps our Epistle lesson offers more clues about what worship should be. It reminds us that true and proper worship is an embodied experience. We present our very selves to God. Rather than being asked to buy and bring sacrifices with us to worship, we offer ourselves to God as living sacrifices.

² Tyler Sit. *Staying Awake: The Gospel for Changemakers* (Chalice Press, 2021), p.4.

³ Robert Schnase. *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations, Revised* (Abingdon Press, 2018), 52.

In this sacred encounter we are connecting with God and God with us. Worship is not what we do on Sunday morning; worship is a way of life.

Worship is countercultural. It reorients us from the way of the world to the Way of Jesus. It reminds us that we are called to lead lives of love.

Pastor Tyler explains it beautifully:

Worship trains your heart to love the God who is beyond, who is right in front of you and unimaginably greater, who is deeply healing and almost disturbing, all at the same time.⁴

Worship changes our perspective. It opens us to encounter a God who is Spirit, a God who is holy, and a God who is, well, to be direct, God.

Unfortunately, I'm not able to give you a "how to" manual on passionate worship or a list of 10 ways to worship in spirit and in truth. I can, however, assure you I've seen it and experienced it.

I've seen it happen here in this sacred space week after week. I've watched as many of you have set aside whatever it is that is happening in your life and given yourself wholly to worship.

I've seen it elsewhere. In other sanctuaries to be sure, but far beyond them too. Over the last few days, I've seen it happen spontaneously in the middle of the road and in the center of a classroom.

Worship cannot be confined to any one space or style. Worship is habit forming and life changing.

And, in the words of Pastor Tyler, "worship is love training. Worship enlarges our own hearts so that we can carry more love into the world."⁵

Siblings in Christ, this is the worship Jesus was talking about. May you experience it again and again. Amen.

⁴ Sit, p.5.

⁵ Sit, p.6.