

MAKING WORSHIP REAL - PART I

“To Father's House We Go”

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Isa.40:28-31

Following a Sunday morning service a few months ago, a young person met me at the door, gripped my hand fervently and said,

“I certainly love to hear you preach. In fact, I drive a good many miles every Sunday just to hear your sermon. As far as I'm concerned, the rest of the service is merely trimming.”

I'm sure my young friend meant well and, his comment made me work all the harder the next week to try and bring a message which would meet the needs of those who worship with us. But frankly, I was surprised. It had never occurred to me that anyone would go to all the effort necessary to attend church just to hear a sermon.

A few weeks later, I received another jolt when I read the results of a survey by the Minister's Research Foundation showing that, in answer to the question,

“What is the most compelling reason for your church attendance?”.

The most frequent answer was, “The influence of the Pastor.”

Way down the list was, “A desire to worship God.”

Apparently, at least in the minds of those who answered the inquiry, pastors outranked God in determining church attendance. As a minister, I'm not flattered by this revelation. I'm shocked! But more than that I'm ashamed to think that even unconsciously I, along with my fellow pastors, have

utterly failed to teach our people the real meaning of worship.

The church is first, last and always a spiritual institution.

It is our Father's House and has no other end than to help men and women

meet Him,

know Him and

finally worship Him.

Everything is supplementary.

The sermon,

the music,

the liturgy,

the menu of enticing activities

which has been designed to arouse enthusiasm and participation are all secondary. They are means to the end that all who enter the church might worship God and, through worship, exalt Him as Lord over all of life.

But somehow, this purpose has eluded us. Even when we do enter the sanctuary with a holy hunger gnawing at our hearts, we find it hard at times to get close to God. We are like a little child reaching with outstretched arms to grasp the moon only to discover it is infinitely more than an arm's length away.

Even the earth-formed tools of

anthems,

hymns and

prayers

seem unable to bridge the gap at times. We continue to attend church by force of habit, but it contributes little to our lives. It lacks luster. It seems divorced from life as we are obliged to live it.

The basic reason for all this is we have never been told, or have failed to remember, that our chief aim

in life as human beings is to worship God and the task of the church is to help us do that.

Therefore, to meet what seems to be an appalling need, I have prepared a series of sermons.

They do not pretend to be the final word on the matter.

They will not answer all your questions about worship.

I hope they will answer some of your questions about worship.

They will not give you *all* the techniques which help make worship real.

I hope they will give you *some* of the techniques which help make worship real.

To add to their relevance, I have built them around the periods listed in our new order of worship.

Worship is not a single act, but a combination of acts.

Each of these parts of worship has a purpose.

I have tried to direct your thinking by dividing our new order of worship into periods. If we do our job properly, you will not be able to tell when one emphasis ends and the other begins because, ideally, they flow together. However, it is my sincere desire and earnest goal that every devout worshiper who enters this sanctuary will find, as they follow along, they are moved logically and meaningfully from preparation to commitment.

Our goal, as the series' theme declares, is to Help Make Worship Real. To add meaning to our new order of worship, I have prepared these five sermons.

The sermon you will hear today is built around the Period Of Preparation and is called: “To Father's House We Go.”

The second will seek to point out the need of giving God our Praise And Adoration and is called: “When Thanksgiving Is Not Enough.”

“The Sanctuary of the Soul” is the title of the third sermon and will aim at making The Period Of Introspection And Confession real.

The fourth part of our worship is The Period Of Thanksgiving And Discipleship. My sermon for that Sunday will be “You Hold The Answer To Your Prayers.”

And finally, The Period Of Proclamation And Commitment will be emphasized in the sermon entitled: “When The Service Begins.”

A couple of years ago, I had a conference with a young boy whose father had been away for several years and had come back a real war hero. I could see the lad was disturbed about something and, finally, he just blurted it out:

“I'm not a Christian any more. Christ used to be real to me, but now He's a stranger. He seems so distant.”

He had told me previously about his Dad's exploits and so I said,

“Well, son, did it seem hard to stay close to your Dad when he was away in the war?”

The boy answered,

“On, no. We had a letter from him almost every day. We prayed for him at the dinner table and Mom and I talked about him all the time. We were continually

making plans for the day when he would come home.

No, sir! It wasn't hard to feel close to him when he was so far away."

I said,

"But suppose you had never gotten any letters? Suppose you'd never mentioned his name? Suppose you had only given him a fleeting thought about once a week? Do you think he would have been just as close to you then?"

The lad smiled at me and said,

"I get your point. Christ doesn't seem as real and as close as He used to because I don't give Him a chance. I have neglected the bible. I guess you'd call that 'His letters'. I hardly ever talk about Him to my family or friends. I don't even give myself a chance to think about Him anymore. I hardly ever come to church. Yeah. I see what you mean. Even a Christian needs little reminders about God to stay close to Him."

The boy was right. We do need little reminders about God if we are to stay close to Him.

Even a Stradivarius needs tuning!

And Christians cannot survive in this materialistic age of ours unless we take time to tune our soul through regular worship in Our Father's House.

We live at a terrific pace these days. We are on the go from morning to night. In fact, we are so conditioned to *doing* something we feel a sense of frustration if we find ourselves with a free hour with nothing to do.

We are geared to a cycle of constant activities. Speed seems to be the watchword of our day. Even “The Saturday Evening Post” comes out on Wednesday! With all of these distractions, there is little wonder we find it hard to feel close to God.

An American in South America was driving a caravan on natives through the jungle at a tremendous speed. Finally, one night, the whole lot of them squatted down on their haunches and absolutely refused to move forward for several days. The American protested, bribed and threatened, but they wouldn't budge. He asked them why and they said,

“We have been moving too fast for a week. Now we shall sit down and let our souls catch up with our bodies.”

That is a wise word for our busy age. We need to take time out for worship and contemplation. We need to be still so we might know, once again, that He is God.

“Each soul must face some Sinai as Moses sought of old
And find immortal music writ on slabs of living gold.

Each soul must seek some Sinai, some high flung mountain peak
Where he may hear the thunder roll and timeless voices speak.

Each soul must seek some Sinai, some secret place apart
Where he may be alone with God and newborn kingdoms chart.

Each soul must seek some Sinai, where God's own voice is heard
And he may see the mystic sign and hear the secret word.”

Yes, we have a need for worship and, as I stated in my very first sermon as your pastor, my dream is that this shall be a House of Worship. A place where, as you pass through the doors of this sanctuary, you will feel a sense of God's presence and go away knowing this has been your Sinai!

That you have met Him,
known Him and
been constrained to follow Him.

But, to do this—to make worship real—you must make adequate preparations.

Meaningful worship demands discipline.

It is impossible to enter into a transforming experience of worship unless you have submitted to the same kind of disciplined training which makes a great athlete.

I told you some time ago about Barbara Ann Scott, the Olympic figure skating champion who, when asked the reason for her victory said,

“It was the result of practice.”

She went on to say she had spent 20,000 hours practicing for that one event. No wonder she won!

Colonel Gregg told us at the Know Your Church Dinners about Ben Hogan, the famous golf champion who said,

“Golf was my business and I gave everything I had to it.”

No wonder he was a champion.

If we are to make worship real we, too, must make adequate preparation. We cannot give it all of our attention all the time, but we can give it all of our attention some of the time. The reason worship is not real for some is that they are unwilling to pay the price.

As someone said recently,

“The extent of some people's religion is they know the
name of the church they stay away from.”

We need to begin with the discipline and wisdom of the man who dashed off this little couplet.

"Every time I pass my church
I pay a little visit
So some day when I'm carried in
The Lord won't say, 'Who is it?'"

But even that is not enough. We have to do more than the man who said jokingly,

"Oh, yes, I have a little flower of worship down in my
heart, and I water it once a week."

We have to pamper it.

Cultivate it.

Purge it of dead branches.

In short, we have to work at it if we are to see it bloom into a flower of real and lasting beauty which will pour its fragrance into every corner of our lives.

How is this to be done? What preparations are necessary if we would make worship real?

Well, first of all, you must begin long before you set foot inside the church.

You Must Come In A Proper Mood.

One cannot suddenly plunge into a mood of worship. It must be developed. If, for instance, you have filled your mind with 40 pages of secular news from the Sunday paper before church, you will probably find it difficult to bring yourself into the atmosphere of eternal things.

One valuable help would be to read quietly a devotional passage from the bible before leaving home.

But, Sunday mornings are often hectic and, if your house is like ours, that may be impossible. But you can make the effort to attend Sunday School and then, as soon as you can after class, find your place in the sanctuary. Try to plan it so you will have those ten minutes to listen to the organ prelude in silence. And please, note that: *in silence*.

We have the reputation of being a friendly church and we want to keep it. But sometimes I have the feeling we have made a formality out of our informality. As a result, we have lost something of the mystery which should be part of our worship. Our casual conversations during the organ prelude certainly do not add to our sense of the presence of God. In fact, they can have a detrimental effect upon others as well as ourselves.

Mark Hallett was telling me the other day about an incident which happened a number of years ago. He was playing a very loud passage of music which came to an abrupt stop. As the organ sounded its last note, a lady sitting about half way back was heard to say to her companion,

“I baste mine on both sides!”

If others had been trying to establish a spirit of prayerful worship, her comment didn't help. Greeting new friends and renewing old acquaintances is good, but there is a time and place. 10:50AM is not the time and the sanctuary is not the place.

Another technique which would help incite your sluggish mind to worship and help get it into a proper mood would be to use our hymnal as a prayer book. Our Episcopalian friends are trained to enter the sanctuary, bow for a moment of prayer, and then pick up the prayer book in the pew and begin quietly reading. As a result, there is a beautiful solemnity about their services which is a thing to be desired.

We don't have prayer books. But, in the front of our hymnal you will find calls to worship which will direct your thinking. In the back, scripture passages and, throughout, magnificent poetry and prayers found in the words of the hymns themselves.

I wonder how many of you have had the soul-thrilling experience of silently reading the poetry of some of our great hymns. Here are acres of diamonds going to waste at your very finger tips.

Spend the ten minutes of the Period of Preparation that way and you will find that through the

medium of prayerful meditation and Mark's magnificent music, which some of you listen to but never hear, you will be lifted out of yourself and the consideration of your problems into the holy of holies as you contemplate the things of God.

Come With An Inner Hunger And A Contrite Heart

I came across a little clipping in my files this week which asks the question,

“What do you bring to church?”

It says some folks bring a pick to church and their attitude is one of cynicism and fault-finding. They pick at the preacher, the choir, the flowers, the order or worship, the sermon. They are so busy finding fault, they miss out on the blessings which might have been theirs.

Others bring a shovel with them to church. When the preacher makes a particular point, they piously pick up their shovel and say to themselves,

“Boy, did that hit Susie Smith between the eyes. I hope she got that jolt!”

There are some who come with a rake and a basket. Their attitude is,

“What does the Lord have for me this morning?”

They come with a broken and contrite heart. They rake up the admonitions and the blessings which God has in store for them in that service. And, they use their basket to gather up the surplus which can help them throughout the week.

I talked to one man this past week who told me he was still using a little bit of truth he had heard in a sermon nearly two months ago. WOW! What a blessing that was to me! And what an encouragement to make my messages to you as relevant as possible.

How much more real worship would be if we were to strive to develop the spirit of Bertha Gerneaux Woods when, in her lovely poem “*Prayer On Entering Church*”, she writes:

“In this little hour we

Spend in fellowship with Thee

Search us, keenly Lord, we pray,

Lest we leave Thy House today
Through our stubbornness unfed
By the true and living bread.
Lest we know not that we thirst,

Selfishness that we have nursed
Through the years, Oh blessed Lord,
Smite it with Thy two edged sword.
Make us over. Make us kind.
Let no lonely stranger find
Lack of friendly hand clasp, or
Pass unwelcomed through the door.
Let the whole week sweeter be
For this hour we spend with Thee.

Come With An Open Mind

Let me share another clipping from my file. I don't know who said it, but it's right on!

“Sometimes the sermon hasn't a chance. It may have been wrought out on the preacher's deepest conviction, bathed in sweat of brow and brain, steeped in prayer and tears, and delivered with holy unction, but with some folk in the congregation, it is a case of ‘pouring water on a duck’. It doesn't penetrate.

“No sermon has a chance with a closed mind. If prejudice has priority, or if a week of shady business activities has throttled the conscience, the sermon is not likely to get beneath the surface. If a businessman mentally carries his ledger into the pew with him, the

sermon will have to stay out.

“Many a sermon is dissipated on encountering a person who comes to church merely as a social diversion. It cannot get into a heart which already is filled to overflowing with something else.

“The good housewife who sits through a worship service wondering how the Sunday dinner is coming along is not giving the sermon its full chance, and will go on her way when the benediction is pronounced little the better for her coming.

“The hearer is a part of the sermon, and may enhance it or destroy it. If the sermon is to have its real chance, there must be preparation for it.

“The debris must be cleared from mind and heart and the sermon must be given a sympathetic response. It's need must be felt, and it must be received as God's message. It is the duty of the worshiper to give the sermon a chance.”

A Sunday never passes but what I pause at that sanctuary door leading from my study and pray:

“God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

And even as the preacher must prepare himself to deliver the sermon, the people must prepare themselves to receive the sermon. Perhaps it would help if you paused at that other sanctuary door and prayed,

“Speak, Lord, your servant listens.”

What glorious benefits would be yours if you gave yourself wholeheartedly to preparation for your weekly visit to Father's House. That kind of effort is richly rewarded for it brings the fulfillment of your earnest desires:

"Inner strength,
Spiritual light,
Divine love,
Ineffable peace."

Glenn Ford, the famous movie star, has a terrific article in the April issue of Guidepost Magazine. In it he tells how, early in his movie career, he got away from his childhood religious training. But when their little boy, Peter, came along, Glenn and his wife, Eleanor Powell, decided they had to do some serious re-thinking of their life pattern. They came to the conclusion they could not say to their young son, "Do as we say and not as we do."

"Nor", says Glenn Ford, "could I let my wife carry all the load. I couldn't say, 'Run along with Mommy, little man, and learn about God. Dad will sleep.'"

All three of them enrolled in Sunday School. Glenn Ford writes:

"I learned that in neglecting church, I had been missing something. The church could act as a catalyst between God and me. I discovered that keeping Him front and center in my consciousness on Sunday increased my awareness of Him in daily living. I found that forming part of a congregation meant a closer tie with my fellow man, a giving, a sharing, as well as a taking...perhaps the finest thing I learned was to watch, with humility, the fulfillment which can come from accepting Divine guidance."

Oh, my friends, worship is not refrigerated formalism. Worship is the growing edge of the soul. It is, as someone has said,

“man in the act of breaking out of his physical cocoon
and growing wings which enable him to soar into the
spiritual world. Worship is the metamorphosis of a
man from an earthly to a heavenly creature.”

If that be true, it is worth striving for. It is an act in which we should all want to excel and remember
“the man who walks with God always gets to his destination.”

Our scripture lesson this morning ends with this assurance:

“They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength” (Isa.40:31).

Indeed, as the poet has said,

“What a change within us this one short hour
Spent in Thy presence will avail to make!
What heavy burdens from our spirits take!
What parched grounds refreshed as with a shower!
We kneel, how weak! We rise, how full of power.”

Yes, even a Stradivarius needs tuning. Worship is absolutely essential for our spiritual well-being and, to be proficient in the art, we must make proper preparation. We must learn to

Come in the proper mood,

Come with an inner hunger and a contrite heart,

Come with an open mind.

The result will be an experience which is both thrilling and enriching. For

“They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.”