

MAKING WORSHIP REAL - PART V

“When The Service Begins”

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Matt 25:31-40

It happened in a town in Texas. But it just as easily could have taken place in any city. Anywhere. A man who was visibly drunk staggered into the side entrance of a church which stood on a prominent corner. The morning service was in progress and, as he came reeling into the sanctuary, he found himself face to face with several hundred people.

It was a quiet moment in the meeting. He could hear no one talking and, in his intoxicated condition, he could not comprehend the meaning of the occasion. So he called out in a loud voice, “Hi, everybody! What's goin' on here?”

His intrusion was inexcusable, but there's a kind of unconscious wisdom in his question. It is one which we have been asking ourselves for the past four Sundays as we have sought to find ways of Making Worship Real.

“What's goin' on here?” when several hundred people gather on Sunday?

Are minds being opened?

Are the sorrowing being comforted?

Are hearts being blessed?

Are people being inspired?

Are old grudges being displaced?

Are wrongs being righted?

Are the people being made to feel a sense of the presence of God which challenges them to nobler living?

“What's goin' on here?” is a sobering question. I hope with all my heart these few sermons have helped provide the answer. I hope they have made it possible for you to see that behind the

skeleton of our new order of worship there is rhyme and reason. Each period of worship has its purpose, leading from preparation to commitment.

The Archbishop of Canterbury made a startling statement some time ago in which he said:

“The world can be saved from political chaos and
collapse by only one thing...and that is worship.”

That may sound like an oversimplification, but listen while the Archbishop explains what he means by worship. He says:

“To worship is to quicken the conscience by the
holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of
God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God
and to devote the will to the purpose of God.”

And when we think of worship in these terms, we begin to see the basis of his claim.

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collapse by only one thing...and that is worship.”

Somewhere I heard a story about a stranger who slipped into a typical Quaker meeting. Everyone was sitting quietly. Nothing was being said. Finally, the curious visitor whispered to the Quaker seated next to him, “When does the service begin?” And the man replied, “The service begins when the meeting ends!”

The benediction is not merely the signal that worship is over. The supreme test of worship is not whether or not we have had a satisfying emotional experience in this auditorium, but whether or not we have established the connection between what has happened here and the life which awaits us beyond the door.

One of the most common criticisms leveled against modern religion is that it often seems irrelevant to life. Apparently, many have the opinion that the church is floating above the modern

world and is entirely out of touch with it.

For the average person, it would appear the things he does in church on Sunday may have little relationship to what he does for 16 hours a day, six days a week. Perhaps the satire of Bliss Carman contains more truth than we care to admit when she writes:

“They're praising God on Sunday.
They'll be alright on Monday.
It's just a little habit they've acquired.”

Well, the burden of my message this morning is that we come to clearly understand there can be no divorce between what happens here on the inside and what takes place there on the outside When The Service Begins. In fact, we will never make worship real unless we break down the walls which encase us and translate what we say with our lips into what we do with our lives.

That won't be easy. The drain upon our spiritual resources will be great. That's why we must learn to build a sanctuary within our souls where, in the midst of the heat of a busy day, we can pause for a moment of reflection and refreshing. For, as the poet has said,

“Who builds a church within his heart
Who takes it with him everywhere,
Is holier far than he whose church
Is but a one-day house of prayer.”

Christianity is a serving religion. Other great religions may teach their adherence to withdrawal from life and aim at a stoic attitude toward the withering heat of a world in the process of being consumed with peril. Not so with Christianity. Jesus made it perfectly clear we are saved to serve and that “He who puts his hand to the plow and turns back” for any reason is not worthy of the name Christian.

H. G. Wells has said somewhere that he personally believed Buddhism to be the best religion but, unfortunately, it could only flourish in countries with a warm climate! And The Alliance Weekly recently quoted a Catholic priest who lamented the plight of another priest who had been thrown into a foreign prison and “forbidden to practice his religion.”

Well, from the point of view of this particular preacher, such statements border on the ridiculous. True Christianity does not consist of external observances which can be forbidden by those hostile to you. Nor, does real religion center on ethereal practices which can only be carried out in 70° weather.

It is one of the glories of the Christian faith that it enables people to conquer their environment, however disagreeable, and reverse the forces of evil which attack them. In fact, the church has made its greatest strides during times of persecution and privation, for it is then the God whom we “worship in spirit and in truth” responds by giving us power to triumph over any difficulty.

Now to be sure, we cherish the moments of calm we experience when we are alone with God. We all have a tendency to say with Samuel Gregg, as he writes about the three disciples' reaction to the transfiguration of our Lord:

“Stay, Master, stay upon this heavenly hill;
A little longer let us linger still;
With all the mighty ones of old beside,
Near to God's holy presence still abide...”

Yes, all of us long for those high moments of the soul and we are loath to leave them. But,

“No,” sayeth the Master, “the hour's past, we go;
Our home, our life, our duty lies below;
While here we kneel upon the mountain prayer,
The plow lies waiting in the furrow there.

Here we sought God that we might know His will,
There we must do it, serve Him, seek Him still.”

Yes, there are things to be done.

There are problems to be solved.

There are mountains to be conquered.

There are burdens to be lifted.

And if we would experience the closeness of God, then we must respond to His appeal for service. For “He is nearest Him who serves Him best.”

Well, someone says, what can I do? My answer is, more—much more—than you would ever dream! I suppose all of us are prone at times to overlook the importance and value of little things done to the glory of God. We fail to see that great doors often turn on little hinges.

Back in 1880, a U.S. Revenue Cutter put into the harbor of Wilmington, N.C. As it lay in harbor, the captain of the cutter whose name was Charles Jones, took the opportunity to tell a young Chinese cabin boy the story of Christ and the gospel. What that boy heard that day proved to be the turning point in his life. And, as a result of the captain's witness, he became a Christian.

His name was Soong. He was a member of the Soong family of China which included Mei Ling, now known as Madam Chiang Kaishek. What a day's work that was! And yet, if captain Jones had despised the task of speaking to an insignificant Chinese cabin boy, the response to Christian missions in China might very well have been different. The underground church, which now exists behind the Bamboo Curtain, might never have had an opportunity to exist at all.

Even so, there are endless opportunities to serve Christ right here in our church. For instance, who can overestimate the worth of sincere and friendly ushers? These men who render that service for us do an invaluable task. A merchant can spend hundreds of thousands of dollars in advertising to create good will among his customers only to have it spoiled by one rude clerk.

And the same is true of our church. We can labor long and hard to attract people to our services, but one thoughtless, inconsiderate usher can render it all useless. That's why I'm so thankful for our corps of ushers who are doing an invaluable service for the Kingdom of God. When you think of what they do in this light, you can see how important their phase of service becomes.

Or, take that special work for which you have a particular talent. Poster making. Typing. Sewing. The ability to make a good impression over the telephone, or to beautify our buildings by careful landscaping, painting or wallpapering. All of these abilities can be made to serve your church well.

They may seem small and insignificant. But even as the accumulated force of individual tiny drops of water will eventually erode a granite rock, so, too, the combined influence of many little deeds of service done for the glory of Christ can accomplish much for the Kingdom of God in Morgan Park.

In his book, The Meaning Of Church Membership, Wayne Clark reminds us of another simple service which any Christian can perform: making calls upon the sick and the aged. He tells of a Sunday School teacher who arranged to take her class of girls into the home of an aged saint who had been bed-ridden and neglected for many years.

They planned a short program of songs, bible verses, and prayers and when they left, each girl gave that sweet, little lady a lovely flower. After the last of the children had gone out of the room, that dear old soul, who had suffered so long in silence, motioned for the teacher to come close. Looking up from her bed of pain, she whispered, “I had almost forgotten.” And then broke into tears.

The teacher gave the woman a moment to get hold of herself and then asked, “You had almost

forgotten what?” Smiling through her tears, the lady answered, “I had almost forgotten there are beautiful girls like these. I has almost forgotten there are such things as music and laughter. I had almost forgotten there are flowers and that God cares. Thank you so much for coming. Please come again, soon.”

“I was sick and He visited me”, said Jesus. And then he went on to explain,

“As much as ye did it unto the least of these, my
brethren, ye did it unto me.”

The Priesthood Of All Believers, which Baptists hold to be true, is more than a theological concept. It is Christianity in action. It is turning words into deeds and worship into work.

For even as Simon and Andrew, James and John were commanded by Christ to become the preachers and teachers of a new world-shaking faith, so today, every Christian is commissioned as a minister of Jesus Christ.

That's God plan and we cannot deny it. The church is a hospital for sinners and not a rest home for saints. It is every Christian a minister of Christ. It may be the ministry of

the kitchen sink,

or the office desk,

or the disk and plow,

but, whatever it is, and wherever it is, if we are truly Christian we will do what we do for the glory of Christ.

When we give our hearts to Jesus and accept His divine salvation, we also accept the obligation to serve.

“For when they drove the nails into His hands, He bought our
hands With all their ability to reach and hold and lift.

When they drove the nails into His feet, He bought our feet --
With all of their ability to walk and run and climb.

When they put the crown of thorns upon His head, he bought our mind --
With all of its ability to think and dream and plan.
And when they cast the spear into His side, he bought out heart --
With all of its ability to give and feel and love.”

The result of worship must be work. The service on Sunday cannot end with the benediction. It must continue outside the walls of the sanctuary When The Service Begins.

There is an interesting legend told about Christ after He ascended into heaven. He was talking with one of the angels who asked, “Tell me, how do you propose to expand the Kingdom on earth?” Directing the attention of the angel to his disciples, the Lord answered, “Through those 12 ordinary men.” “What if they fail?” asked the angel. “If they fail,” replied Christ, “I have no other plan.”