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Sermon Series:
"Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations:
II. The Practice of Passionate Worship"

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2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)
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Psalm 84:1–7; Luke 18:9–14

We continue a six-week sermon series today. This series is based on a book by Robert Schnase, a Methodist pastor and bishop. His book proposes that vitality and fruitful ministries in congregations are based on five specific practices. An interim period between called pastors like the one that characterizes First Presbyterian at this moment is an ideal time for a congregation to examine ways it can become more vital as a community of faith and more fruitful in its ministry as servants of God to the world.

Last week we looked at the first of those practices: ***radical hospitality***. This week we examine ***passionate worship***.

For those of us in the Presbyterian Church, the words "passionate" and "worship" are not typically linked. The spiritual descendants of John Calvin are known for their intellectual bent, not their warm and fuzzy side! This why Presbyterians are frequently called God's "frozen chosen." The life of the mind in service to God characterizes Presbyterians most of the time. If we get exercised about something, it may be over the meaning of a word or phrase or a point of order. We love order!

Passion seems too close for many of us to the idea of emotionalism and the loss of control. So the idea of "passionate worship" may be a stretch for us, especially when offered by a Wesleyan whose tradition values the experience of a warmed heart.

Our scripture texts for today do not provide a definition of worship as much as they provide nuances to the character of worship. So before going to those texts, let's get some sense of worship's definition. That seems like a proper Presbyterian approach.

Worship can be best defined as the appropriate human response to an encounter with God. In the Old Testament, a human encounter with God involved fear and awe, a sense of unworthiness in the presence of the Ruler and Creator of the universe. Speaking to God in such an encounter was done only with reticence, and if words were spoken, humility and praise and the offer to serve God would characterize those words. The proper human response in an encounter with God was to listen and obey.

In rare circumstances, scripture offered a glimpse of human argument with God. Eventually a form of worship evolved that embraced protest against God and the unfairness of life. This was known as "Lament" and can be seen in many of the Psalms. The development of "Lament" as a legitimate expression of faith provided a valuable shift in understanding God as more approachable in the vicissitudes of life.

When an encounter with God took place, it was typically unexpected and unplanned and personal. In the Old Testament, such an encounter often prompted the person to mark the geographic spot where the encounter took place, making of it a memorial—typically a pile of stones. This served as a reminder of the encounter with God. Such places would become gathering locations, often with some structure built where people would come to worship and seek the presence of God.

We have a hymn that reflects such a moment. "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing" in its second verse has these strange words: "Here I raise my Ebenezer;

hither by thy help I'm come; and I hope, by thy good pleasure, safely to arrive at home."[1] Raising an "Ebenezer" is a reference to creating a marker that reminds one of God's presence and help. It is a reference to 1 Samuel 12:7 when God helped the Israelites defeat the Philistines. The word "Ebenezer" is a Hebrew word meaning "stone of help." That song reminds the community of faith that God's goodness is instrumental in daily battles we fight, and God's presence is what gets us through.

Such reminders of God's goodness and presence prompt us to worship, and therefore characterize worship with remembrance, thanksgiving, and hope for the future.

So worship was initially an individual's personal response to God, and later develops in the Old Testament into a community response to God. From the personal encounters with God by the patriarchs and matriarchs of the faith to the Exodus of the Jewish nation from bondage, and later the re-emergence of the remnant of Judah from exile, the community bears witness and responds to the great God of deliverance from oppression to freedom.

When Moses stood before Pharaoh and demanded that his people be freed, the purpose of that freedom was so they could worship God. Biblical freedom has always been rooted, not merely in freedom *from* oppression but freedom *to* worship the true God. Great moments and movements throughout history are founded on such a search for freedom: freedom from the tyranny of others' imposed values and freedom to value for ourselves what we believe to be important and true. In this week commemorating Martin Luther King, Jr., we celebrate just such a moment in history.

For the ancient Jewish community, worship developed institutional forms, such as Temple worship and sacrifice. Later during the period of the exile when the Temple had been destroyed, the synagogue was established to provide the community a form of worship that embraced the command to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. The experience of the synagogue established a rhythm of

[1] Robert Robinson, "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing," *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal (*Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 475.

weekly worship. The word "synagogue" means "to bring together" and reflects the community nature of worship as it embraced God's word in the Torah.

Similarly, the Greek word for church (*ekklesia*) means "those called out" to gather together for the worship of God and the service to God. At the heart of Christian worship is a reality of God's deliverance of his people from bondage of fear and sin through Jesus Christ.

The church followed the Jewish pattern of a rhythm of weekly corporate worship. Christians chose the first day of the week as their Sabbath to commemorate Jesus' resurrection.

In his earthly ministry, Jesus embraced both the personal nature of encounter with God and the community engagement with God. He proclaimed both a personal encounter and the coming of God's realm open to all. Jesus also modeled an intimate relationship with God, using the language of a son with his father.

Our text from Psalm 84 speaks of both the grandeur of worship in the Temple and the intimacy of the personal. "Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O Leader of the multitudes, my Sovereign and my God!" (Psalm 84:3)

In Luke 18, Jesus tells a parable about how worship can be engaged appropriately or destructively. The pious Pharisee and the sinful tax collector represent opposite poles of religious practice. Both come to worship, both have a personal experience in worship, but the nature of that experience makes all the difference. Worship can be used to justify one's own actions and create walls of distinction between people, or it can be used to bridge the distance between one's self and God and others. Jesus says that worship which honors God and changes the worshiper toward the good is patterned upon humility and the common experience that sees us as equal before God. Equally sinful, equally forgiven, equally redeemed, equally valued, equally children of the Almighty.

Schnase, the author of *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, links the word "passionate" with the practice of worship. I believe he is not suggesting more

emotional expression in worship, although among the "frozen chosen," the idea of more emotion beyond "none" could be helpful. He is not suggesting the shelving of the intellect. He *does suggest* that the experience of worship be multi-dimensional, including mind and heart and will, differing avenues of expression that parallel the diversity of the way humans learn and interact with reality.

One of the great advances in pedagogy has been the discovery and utilization of the varying styles of learning. Not all people are verbal learners: some of us learn and express ourselves best visually or kinesthetically or musically or mathematically or interpersonally. Those differences, along with personality preferences and cultural and geographical uniqueness, influence the way we understand life and the way we express ourselves.

Schnase suggests that the church be open in its worship to expressions beyond the verbal and linguistic. It should be holistic.

I have had the privilege of going on mission trips to Mexico and Jamaica, and worshiping with those communities. None of them had the grand organs and the refined choirs to which I was accustomed. Yet in every case, I experienced a true worship of God. Worship is not limited to the way I prefer or the way I have always done it.

I believe the primary understanding of the term "passionate" is that those engaged in worship believe that something is at stake, that something matters. And the reality that matters is available to all, not merely some.

What is at stake for you, for your family, for your community that brings you to worship? And when you get here, do you find anything of substance?

The psalmist said, "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let's go up to the house of the Lord!'" (Psalm 122:1) Were you glad when you thought about coming here this morning?

Those are crucial questions for this, and every, congregation. Are we here to be entertained, are we here to be made to feel good about ourselves? Are we here to have our prejudices blessed and our assumptions confirmed?

Are we here to be challenged, are we here to learn, are we here to have our failures exposed and find forgiveness so we can move forward? Are you and I here to offer to God our sickness and brokenness and be healed?

Are we here to find community among people who are different from us yet are in so many ways very similar? Are you and I here because we heard God call our name and we answered, "Here I am, send me"? Are you here to be pressed into service for the redemption of this community and world?

One of the major functions of worship is to provide the community of faith with an alternate perspective on what is important, on the values that are enduring. This world offers so much that is inconsistent with the values which faith embraces.

Psalm 73 is a psalm of perspective. It speaks about one who was envious of the arrogant and wicked with all their prosperity. "People turn and praise them," the psalmist says, "and no one finds fault in them. Always at ease, they increase in riches. In vain I have kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been plagued and am punished every morning. But when I thought how to understand this it seemed a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God." For the person of faith, something happens in worship. The psalmist says, "Then I perceived their end; truly, God, you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin; they are destroyed in a moment, utterly swept away." Worship has the power to give people of faith perspective, to see beyond the immediate.

One of the great theologians of the twentieth century was Paul Tillich. He lived in Germany up until the outbreak of World War II and then emigrated to the U.S. Toward the end of his life, he taught an adult Sunday School class where he revealed one of the great sorrows of his life. He and his wife were quite progressive in their younger years. They determined to raise their children in a value-free household, expecting their children to make good choices for themselves about life and faith.

As the Nazi movement took hold in Germany, one of its major focuses was the recruitment of youth. Many progressive parents lost their children to the Nazi movement. These children had not learned the need and ability to discern the motives of one's self and the motives of others. They had not learned to value others even in their differences. They could not distinguish between good and evil. In the vacuum of no values, these children took the values that the Nazi regime proposed, and a whole generation was lost.

Tillich said it was the greatest sorrow of their lives and the biggest mistake—a generation of children lost to the evil of Nazism.

Worship has the power to orient us. Worship has the power to disrupt our perspective and give us something completely new and fresh. Worship has the power to re-orient us to the things which make for life and peace and hope. Worship engages us personally and places us in the center of a community with God.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." I believe worship provided him the ability to see things differently, to dream a dream where boys and girls of every color and race could play and learn and thrive together. King did not see such a reality in America but he could sense its possibilities in the prophets' call for justice and in Jesus' beloved community. Faith compelled him to speak about things that mattered.

What are you passionate about? Is it possible that we Presbyterians can become passionate about worship? Could it be that something is at stake in worship that makes it valuable and necessary? Are there dreams to find there that this world desperately needs?

Perhaps our concern for the next generation of children could motivate us to expand and re-imagine what worship can be and do. I believe that is remarkably important. Such passion might move us beyond ourselves, beyond our concerns and comfort, so that our service to neighbors and our world would parallel the same manner in which Jesus gave himself for us.

Primary resource and reference:

Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations, Robert Schnase, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2007