

WORSHIP MATTERS (John 4:5-42)

I don't know how many times I've heard someone say something like, "I'm spiritual but not religious." And sometimes they go a step further and say, "I can find God in nature more than I can in church."

Sad to say, they just may be right. Church ought to be the first place to look for God, but sometimes it seems that meeting God in church is almost an accident.

Jews and Samaritans had different ideas about where to find God – or at least where to worship God. For Jews it was the temple in Jerusalem. For Samaritans it was Mount Gerizim. King David centralized worship in Jerusalem, partly for political reasons. But Mount Gerizim was a cult center centuries before David, long before Moses, even before Abraham.

There were all sorts of barriers between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. And for her, where to worship was definitely one: You worship in Jerusalem and we worship on Mount Gerizim, and never the twain shall meet.

Fortunately, this is one instance where we've come a long way in 2000 years – from "there's only one place to worship" to "a mountaintop is as good as a cathedral." So in that sense what Jesus said has actually come to pass: where we go to worship doesn't matter – Jerusalem, Mount Gerizim, Rome, Andover. The idea that there's some special place where God can be found is archaic and obsolete.

What's happened is that the ground has shifted and today's worship wars are fought over other issues – style and taste, especially around music. The battles over traditional versus contemporary can get pretty furious. I haven't heard anyone complain about an occasional jazz service, though, and Carolyn and John are welcome any time.

I don't want to talk about worship wars this morning because they don't go to the essence of worship and what it's all about. Instead I want to talk about worship in more general terms and why we bother with this activity that's pretty counter-cultural and why it's central to who we are.

The Samaritan woman was hung up about the right place to worship. For Jesus the where is a non-issue; the how is a lot more important – and for him the way to worship is "in spirit and truth." Or as Eugene Peterson's translation helpfully puts it, "Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth. That's the kind of people [God] is looking for: those who are simply and honestly *themselves* before [God] in their worship. God is sheer being itself – Spirit. Those who worship [God] must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves, in adoration."

The world wants us to worship all sorts of things – celebrities, cars, beauty, power – all sorts of mini-gods. But on Sunday we come to worship the one true God, to encounter something bigger than ourselves and bigger than anything we can manufacture on our own.

Before we go too far, maybe we need to take a step back and consider what the word “worship” actually means. “Worship” comes from an Old English word that literally means “worth-ship.” So to worship is to ascribe worth, we assign value. When we worship out of our very being in ways that engage our spirits – when we worship in spirit and truth, in other words – we ascribe such worth to God that all the world’s mini-gods simply fade away into nothingness. Worship takes seriously the first Commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me.”

True worship involves a paradox. Gathering to worship takes time and energy – and goodness knows there are lots of other demands on our time and energy. And when we get here, we ask for your money. Worship requires an investment, but it doesn’t promise anything tangible in return. It doesn’t promise a better job or success in personal relationships. Unlike soccer practice, worshipping won’t get your kid a college scholarship.

That’s why Marva Dawn describes worship as “a royal waste of time.” It doesn’t deliver anything tangible. In fact, the receipts we send out for gifts to the church say “no tangible goods or services were offered in return.” Thus saith the IRS.

Yes, there have been studies showing that regular church going has health benefits. But church going can’t guarantee a longer life. I’ve done too many funerals for faithful church members who were cut down in the prime of life by disease or accident. Even the most faithful know sorrow and loss.

So from a worldly, purely secular point of view, worship doesn’t make sense. It is a waste of time – a waste of time that could be spent doing other things that deliver something tangible.

But Marva Dawn doesn’t merely say that worship is a waste of time. She says it’s a *royal* waste of time. And that makes all the difference. She uses the adjective as a way of saying that worship is how we participate in the kingdom of God. We can get around the “kingdom” language if we prefer and call it a *divine* waste of time.

Worship is where we define ourselves in relationship to God, where our identity as God’s people is shaped. In the letter to the Colossians, God’s people are instructed to clothe themselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, love, forbearance, forgiveness, peace, gentleness, and thankfulness. Compare those virtues to their opposites that we see all around us – compare kindness to the rudeness of some who are famous, compare humility to arrogance, love to indifference, forgiveness to vengeance, peacefulness to injustice and conflict, thankfulness to narcissism.

How far will those virtues get you in a dog-eat-dog, do-what-it-takes-to-get-ahead world? Not very, which is why we’re always at least a little bit surprised when someone with those virtues does make it. We see them somehow as exceptions that prove the rule.

Gentleness and patience, compassion and kindness don’t rate very highly in the culture that surrounds us. But they’re the language of grace, the vocabulary of faith, the essence of God’s reign.

God is no more present at 10:00 on Sunday morning than any other time of the week, no more present in this sanctuary than in a classroom or an office or a hospital corridor or on the top of a mountain. What is different is our awareness of God's presence and our response. When we worship, God is the center of our attention.

When we worship, we learn to focus on the eternal. We hear stories of how people just like us experienced God long ago and far away, in a culture that was different from our in almost every respect. And yet despite all those differences, the same God meets us and speaks to us today right here in this place.

In worship we raise our voices in song and learn to wait on the Lord in silence. We practice not only believing in God, but being the new creation God calls us to be. We offer prayers for the world so when we leave this place we can care for the world. We practice trusting God's presence in a bit of Communion bread so we can trust that same presence in the other hungers of our lives.

Worship may be a divine waste of time because nothing we do in worship is for our own glory. It's all for the glory of God. It's not efficient, not glamorous, , sometimes not even very satisfying. But it's the best hope for changing us and, by changing us, for changing the world.