

“Worship: What’s It All About?” (Part 2)

This is the second of 2 messages where we are thinking about worship, and worship services. Last week I said that the word “worship” comes from a word that means “to ascribe worth”. Worship is giving God ultimate value and worth. I mentioned that the primary purpose of our worship time together is to *give* praise and honor to the Lord, and not *get* anything. But if we truly worship and come into the presence of God, it will change us! Real worship, according to Romans 12:1, is presenting *ourselves* as a living sacrifice to God, *dedicating* ourselves to God and His will and purposes.

The sixth chapter of Isaiah describes a worship experience that demonstrates this. “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said, ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.’ The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke” (Isaiah 6:1-4).

It is the year King Uzziah of Judah died. Uzziah was for the most part a strong and godly king. But he’s gone now. In this time of national mourning a young man named Isaiah goes into the temple. There, he has an encounter with the Living God! He has a vision of the Lord, high and exalted. Above Him were *seraphs*, heavenly creatures with wings, calling out, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory”. The building shakes, and is filled with smoke!

Sensing the awesome presence of God, Isaiah responds: “And I said: ‘Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!’” (Isaiah 6:5). When we really catch a glimpse of the holiness of God, we realize how unholy we are! And so, Isaiah confesses his own sins, and the wickedness of the people around him too.

God responds to this humble, broken young man: “Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: ‘Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out’” (Isaiah 6:6-7). God forgives him, and reassures Isaiah that his guilt is taken away!

Note what happens next: “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I; send me!’ (Isaiah 6:8). God calls Isaiah into His service – to be a prophet for God. And Isaiah responds: Here am I. Send me.

This account of Isaiah’s encounter with the Lord in the temple provides a classic picture of authentic worship. Did you sense the flow here? First, Isaiah bows before the presence and awful holiness of God (**adoration**). Then Isaiah acknowledges his inadequacy and uncleanness (**confession**). God responds by assuring Isaiah that his sin and guilt are taken away (**affirmation**). Finally, Isaiah is moved to dedicate his life to God (**consecration**).

Does this have a bearing on what should happen when *we* gather to worship? Yes! This

movement...this flow...provides a pattern for *authentic* worship! Our suggested *United Methodist* Order of Worship is based on Isaiah 6:1-8. In the past, there were times when in the actual order of worship in the church bulletin I would label parts of service: *Adoration, Confession, Affirmation, Consecration.*

The style and structure of worship services in Protestant churches have changed over the last 40 or 50 years. Back then most churches used a printed order of worship, and it would be pretty much the same whether the congregation was Presbyterian, UCC, Lutheran, or United Methodist. Yes, some orders of worship were more formal, with more printed prayers and responses, and others less so. But generally there were 3 hymns, and Old Testament and a New Testament reading, a Prayer of Confession, the Lord's Prayer, and the Apostles' Creed.

Today, things are different. Fewer churches use printed prayers of confession, recite the Apostles' Creed or say the Lord's Prayer each week. More churches are doing "contemporary worship" – with a praise band, no printed order of worship, no defined place in the service where Old and New Testament lessons are read, or have choral responses to prayers. It is common for churches to now employ computer-generated graphics. Many worship services today are more relaxed and informal, with not only those in the congregation "dressed down", but clergy and worship leaders attired in jeans or casual attire. When churches first moved to so-called "contemporary worship", this often generated a lot of hostility between those who preferred traditional worship, and those who wanted a more contemporary style. Some of the heat over these different preferences that produced the "worship wars" has died down, but tension and bickering still remains in some congregations over the style of worship offered.

But what defines worship is not the style or the form! Worship styles can change from generation to generation. And people sometimes *get stuck on a particular form of worship, or the trappings that go with it* – and make an idol of that! For instance, in one church I served, we removed the pulpit from up front, and took the altar rail out in order to open up more space. After one of these changes someone leaving the worship service said to me, "It's good so-and-so (she gave the name of the person) was not here today. She would have said you were going to hell!"

Please remember, there is no one worship structure or style that is the "right" one! Old Testament worship, New Testament worship, for instance, was much different from what we see in churches today, or what was common in churches 50 years ago!

What defines genuine worship is this: Do our worship services move us to experience what Isaiah experienced in the temple as he encountered the Living God? Does our worship move us along through adoration...confession...affirmation... consecration? Let's keep that question in mind as we look at our worship here at Community UMC.

Even before we move into the first segment – adoration – there is the matter of transitioning into a worship mood and mode. Most people don't come into the sanctuary in a frame of mind to worship! Perhaps they rushed to get to church on time. Maybe they got up in a bad mood, or

had argued with their kids or spouse. Then, there is the chit-chat before the service starts! This “pre-worship talking” is not bad! But how do we move from there into that “holy place”? Churches often have a “Prelude” – music to set the mood of worship. In the United Methodist Book of Worship there is a section that includes prayers for use before worship.

A British pastor named David Head wrote a little book entitled *He Sent Leanness*. It is a delightful collection of prayers that, if we were honest, we might admit to praying! He has a section he calls: “*Private Prayers Before Public Worship*”. Here are some: “O God, I hope the sermon doesn’t last more than 15 minutes.” “Please, Lord, grant that I did turn the oven down.” And then this one: “Lord, give us all a nice feeling this morning. May Thy special blessing be with those who will be active in this service while the rest of us sit still and listen. We pray that we may enjoy the preliminaries, and that the sermon will give us all a glow. I know that I have offended at least two people this week with my quick temper, but please do not let the thought of that intrude upon this spiritual feast. Praise God. Amen.”

In a traditional service we may have a “Call to Worship” or “Invocation”, which can be a bridge that moves us from the distractions on our mind to focusing on God and His glory.

Then, there is the first movement that we find in Isaiah: **adoration**. In many churches the first hymn or song usually is a praise song, which hopefully sets a tone of praise and adoration for God.

Let’s talk about music. There are probably more fights in churches over music than anything else in the area of worship! Music is a matter of personal taste. There is no one music style or genre that is more “Christian” than another, or that has to be used in worship services. Most of us evaluate a hymn on *whether we like the tune*. But more important are the *words*. Do the words we sing provide an avenue through which we can praise God? Do they tell the story of God’s character and mighty deeds? Do the words represent solid theology and a sound understanding of Scripture?

Quite honestly, many of the gospel songs of the 1920’s and 1930’s and 1940’s were very much focused on *us* (our feelings, our needs), and not on *God*. Some years ago a man named Charles Merrill Smith wrote a book, *How To Become A Bishop Without Being Religious*. In the book he gives advice on how a pastor can “get ahead”, and even become a bishop! It’s a spoof, satire – he’s poking fun, in order to drive home a more serious truth. In a section on leading worship and picking hymns, he says that a pastor has to distinguish between “good” hymns and “bad” hymns. He writes, “The rule for testing a hymn is this: If it emphasizes the attributes of God – His majesty, power, mercy, goodness, love, etc. – or recounts in some manner the story of Jesus, it is an *objective* hymn, and thus, with possible rare exceptions, *unsuitable* for a public worship service. If, on the other hand, the hymn is preoccupied with the feelings, reactions, desires, hopes and longings of the individual worshiper it is *subjective*, and guaranteed to have a religious kick in it.” In other words, choose hymns that focus on *us*, not on *God*!

In the 1960’s, when work was being done on a new United Methodist Hymnal, someone sent a

hymn suggestion to Bishop Gerald Kennedy, one of the persons on the committee to choose hymns. The title of the song this person wanted in the hymnal was: *I Want to be a Jesus Christ Cowboy in the Holy Ghost Corral!* One of the all-time great hymns of the church has to be one called: *There Ain't No Flies on Jesus*". This masterpiece of church music includes the words: "There may be flies on you guys, but there ain't no flies on Jesus." Actually, one of the things I really like about some of the newer praise music is that many of the songs focus on *God* – praising and glorifying God, rather than dwelling too much on our feelings and needs.

Other acts of worship, besides music, can help move us to praise and adore God: the use of a printed prayer or liturgy of praise, the use some of the psalms in the Old Testament. Many psalms in the Bible are psalms praising God. How cool that we are able to use some of the same worship resources as the ancient Hebrews included in their worship! We have "The Psalter" in our United Methodist Hymnal, where we can read the Psalms responsively.

Worship begins with *adoration*, and then moves on to **confession**. Many churches include in their order of worship a "Prayer of Confession". I used to use this just about every Sunday. We would have a prayer of confession, then a period of silent prayer, and then some words of assurance. This provided a way that we could, collectively, confess our sins to God. A positive factor in using a printed prayer of confession is that we are regularly encouraged to examine our lives before God. Our corporate confession is similar to the laments in the Psalms, where the Israelites confess their sins to the Lord. One of the negatives in always using a prayer of confession is that it can become routine – an empty ritual that we do in church week after week.

David Head, in his book *He Sent Leanness*, has this prayer of confession (a takeoff from a classic prayer called the "General Confession": "Benevolent and easy-going Father, we have occasionally been guilty of errors of judgement. We have lived under the deprivations of heredity and the disadvantages of environment. We have sometimes failed to act in accordance with common sense. We have done the best we could in the circumstances; and have been careful not to ignore the common standards of decency. And we are glad to think that we are fairly normal. Do, O Lord, deal lightly with our frequent lapses. Be thy own sweet Self with those who admit they are not perfect; according to the unlimited tolerance which we have a right to expect from thee. And grant as an indulgent Parent that we may hereafter continue to live a harmless and happy life and keep our self-respect." He presents here a caricature of genuine confession: instead of the heartfelt grief and brokenness that Isaiah felt, we can make excuses, and minimize our sin, treating God as a Mr. Softee! He also has this prayer of confession: "We have done wrong, but we hope nobody will find out."

Even if we don't use a printed Prayer of Confession, hopefully at some point in worship, if we are gripped by the reality of God's holiness, and as we are confronted with God's Word and Truth, we will be moved to examine our lives, repent, and want to change!

Isaiah's experience in temple moved from *adoration*, to *confession*, to **affirmation**. When we gather to worship, hopefully our faith will be affirmed and strengthened. This can, and *should*,

happen through the *preaching* of God's Word! This is why *Scripture* is read, so we can hear the Good News of the gospel again and again! The *choir anthem* or *special music* can be music that tells the story of the gospel, or highlights the faithfulness and love of God. The *morning prayer* time can be affirming, as we go to God expectantly with our joys and concerns.

In traditional worship, often some kind of *affirmation of faith* is used. It can be the Apostles' Creed, or the Nicene Creed. These two creeds embody the essence of what Christians have historically believed. The Apostles' Creed is a direct descendant of the "Old Roman Creed", dating back to about 150 A.D. It was a creed used in the Church at Rome in baptismal ceremonies. So, when we recite that creed, we are joining believers over a span of more than eighteen centuries, affirming: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son our Lord...". Of course, one of the pitfalls of using creeds week after week is that they can become meaningless repetition, a matter of reciting words without thinking of their meaning.

One of the interesting twists taking place in today's changing worship patterns is that some of the current cutting edge worship is actually recovering and rediscovering some of these ancient forms of worship that go back centuries! But a key in their use today seems to be making an effort to *explain the meaning* of these ancient worship tools.

Finally, as Isaiah had a vision of God in the temple, he is moved from *adoration*, to *confession*, to *affirmation*, to ***consecration (or dedication)***. "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'" (Isaiah 6:8). If we leave our place of worship, and somehow don't in some way say or feel, "Here am I; send me", our worship has been in vain.

How can our worship services provide opportunities for us to dedicate ourselves to God?

Some services have the *offering* toward the end of the service, after the sermon. Offering our money to God can symbolize the offering of *our selves* to God. *The Doxology* (sung as the offering is presented) is the last verse of a hymn written by the chaplain of a British private school for boys to sing in the morning. Picture the boys, rising on a cold winter morning, their young voices filling the chilly room: "Praise God, from whom all blessings flow; praise Him all creatures here below; praise Him above ye heavenly host; praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen."

The *closing hymn or song* is often a hymn of dedication. Think of songs like, "Here Am I, Lord", or "Have Thine Own Way, Lord", and other songs that express the giving of our life over to God, once again, or for the very first time. A practice in our United Methodist tradition that has kind of faded away is an *Invitation to Christian Discipleship*, or an "altar call". This was, and still can be, a visible and tangible means of allowing us to dedicate our lives to Christ.

The worship experience of Isaiah gives us a classic outline of genuine worship: adoration... confession...affirmation...consecration!

