

Worship – Our Eternal Calling: Everything Has Changed

John 4:4-26

Text – John 4:4-26

And he had to pass through Samaria. So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour.

A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink', you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock." Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water."

Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true." The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things." Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he."

Introduction

This wonderful story from the fourth chapter of John offers to us one of the most profound principles of worship in the New Testament. The words, "in spirit and in truth" are some of the most often quoted words when considering how we are to approach God in worship. We live in a season of the church when the topic of worship has come to the forefront. I took my first position as a part-time minister of music in 1975. Aside from only a few years between that time and now, I have always held a position as minister of music or pastor of worship in an

evangelical church. I've witnessed a lot of change and tension in those years. Early on, it wasn't too difficult to incorporate some of the newer praise songs into our worship services. After all, I was serving churches in Southern California and that's where most of the songs were originating from at that time. Up until the mid-1980's it wasn't too difficult. We really didn't have the so-called worship wars.

But things began to change in the 80's. There are a number of reasons for the changes, which I don't have time to explore in this message. But I began to go to church growth conferences where "the experts" told us to throw the hymnals away, get rid of the organ and get a band to do contemporary praise and worship songs if we wanted our churches to grow. A lot of churches did just that and they did see growth in numbers. But the whole rationale for changing the music was quite bothersome to me. I loved the new songs. They formed a core part of my musical language. But for these "church growth experts" it had nothing to do with actual worship; it had everything to do with bigger numbers and the lure of success. Along with the change in music, the "experts" advised taking away anything that smacked of tradition: choir, pews, hymnals, crosses, steeples – any kind of traditional Christian symbols. They were marketing the church to Baby Boomers who had an aversion to anything traditional. I'm a Baby Boomer, but a lot of that didn't set too well with me. I was disturbed by the callous disregard for older folks who had a hard time embracing new forms in worship. I was disturbed by the new wave of church leaders who seemingly had no theology of worship – or for that matter, theology of the church. They were skilled in business and marketing and they were showing the churches how to entice the American religious consumer.

There's been a lot of water under the bridge since the 80's. Some churches are still operating from the same consumer paradigms of that era. Some have taken them even further with satellite churches that stream their superstar pastor's messages to remote sites. Many churches don't even look like places of worship anymore. Their services are more like concerts – complete with fog machines and lights – complemented by an inspirational religious message delivered by a superstar pastor.

But there is push-back. Many in the millennial generation have countered the populist consumer approach to church that contemporary evangelicals have dished out in the last thirty years. Some, in their reaction against Boomer worship, have converted to liturgical traditions such as Catholic, Anglican or Eastern Orthodox.

We need to think about these things together.

What is our place in history? What is God doing and saying in the church today? And how can we grow in our understanding and practice of authentic biblical worship without being swept away by consumer-driven trends or radical reaction. There is an opportunity here, friends. God

is speaking today through worship renewal in American evangelical churches. Where do we start and how do we approach worship?

We are, as we have said, to be biblical learners who are servants of one another. If we have assumed that posture, we begin reflecting on worship in the Scriptures and, I think, also in the worship practices of the early church. Now American Protestants, and Baptists, in particular haven't usually considered history an important factor in our reflection on theology and practice. Frankly, we've been naïve and arrogant. The most dynamic years of the church were the first two hundred and fifty years up until the early fourth century when the Roman Empire began to exert its powerful influence. In those first years, in the face of persistent and brutal persecution, the church multiplied and shaped society more than any other era since then. There was a powerful church. We do well to consider the values and practices of our brothers and sisters who lived so long ago.

Worship in the Primitive

Two generations after the Apostles, in the middle of the second century, the church was growing and thriving even though it was facing persecution and scrutiny from the surrounding pagan Roman culture. In a letter to the Roman Emperor explaining the practices of the church in 150 A.D., a church leader by the name of Justin described the weekly worship gathering of the churches:

And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, or, of the eucharistic elements, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons.

And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who [nurtures] the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need.

But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead. For He was crucified on the day before that of Saturn (Saturday); and on the day after that of Saturn, which is

the day of the Sun, having appeared to His apostles and disciples, He taught them these things, which we have submitted to you also for your consideration.

Churches in those days most often met in homes. Their worship was simple, as we just read. It revolved around two primary things – the Word of God and the observance of the Lord’s Table. They also prayed and received an offering for those in need. Did you notice what was missing from Justin’s description of their worship? Music! Isn’t that something? The element that we make the most to-do about is strangely missing from the earliest description of worship in the primitive church. We do know, however, from other sources and the New Testament that the church did sing. But it was simple and they did not use any instruments. And unlike today, music was not an end unto itself. They would sing songs as part of their service of the Word or of the Table. It facilitated the two primary emphases of their corporate worship.

We also know from historical sources that there were regional differences in the way that churches worshiped. There was, in other words, a diversity of worship styles. The primary focus of Word and Table was universal from Rome, to Syria, to Jerusalem, to Africa. But some of the minor elements such as language, songs, and later, creeds would be unique to each region.

Worship in the NT

But how did the early church arrive at their worship forms? What did they inherit from the New Testament to guide them in their practice? Mercifully, the New Testament is not prescriptive like the Old Testament in the details of corporate worship. There is no set order of worship that you will find in the Book of Acts or any of the New Testament epistles. Acts gives us a few descriptions of what happened when the church gathered and Paul offers guiding principles, but no set order of service.

In the opening chapters of the Book of Acts we observe the earliest believers (who were exclusively converted Jews) worshipping both at the Temple and in homes. Acts 2:42 is a well-known description of the elements that were present in their home gatherings: “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” Later, after the apostles had all died, their teaching was persevered in the gospels and in the New Testament epistles. That’s what Justin had called, “the apostles’ memoirs.” Breaking of bread refers to the Lord’s Table in the context of a full meal. As Justin described the Sunday gathering more than a hundred years later, the earliest church focused their worship on the Word and Table with prayer being the catalyst holding the two elements together. The Jewish church in Jerusalem that was birthed on the day of Pentecost patterned their worship practice after what they had experienced in the synagogue, but made it uniquely Christian with the inclusion of the Lord’s Table.

Thirty years later, after the gospel had spread to the Gentiles, the Apostle Paul wrote letters to churches, often guiding and correcting what they would do in their corporate worship services. As in Acts, however, there were no set orders of worship that everyone was obligated to follow. The Word and Table facilitated by prayer remained the primary focus of the churches under Paul's supervision. In I Corinthians, the apostle directs the church to worship "decently and in order" and in everything to treat each other with love. To Timothy, he gives further instructions about order and proper teaching. In his letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians, Paul urges them to let the word of Christ dwell in them richly with the musical forms of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs – the only mention of music in all the New Testament epistles. It is also likely that the early church was already using creeds in their public worship as Paul quotes one in I Timothy 3:16:

Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness:

He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated by the Spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory.

Memorized creeds would make perfect sense for the early church in spreading the gospel and keeping their doctrine pure as many people could not read and no one possessed personal copies of the Scriptures.

John 4

So what do we do with our passage today where Jesus said that the Father is looking for worshippers who will worship "in spirit and in truth?" Jesus' intent in this encounter wasn't to school the woman on proper worship, but she had raised the question while trying to sidestep the personal issues in her life. Jesus was so masterful. He addressed her question and brought the conversation back around to the most pressing issue.

The Samaritan woman's question about worship was related to both style and substance. Today she might have said something like, "You Jews worship with hymns and organs in a cathedral while we worship in a warehouse with a band and stage lights." The issues, of course, are much deeper than such a comment, but Jesus' reply applied to her question as well as contemporary issues. The Jews worshipped properly in Jerusalem with all the prescribed sacrifices found in the Old Testament. The Samaritans had a related, but distorted practice in their worship. Jesus, in saying, "believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father" declared that everything was changing. Radically, the Temple would no

longer be relevant and what the Samaritans were doing would not matter. Jesus, himself, would trump everything.

Worship now would not be situated in a place such as Jerusalem or the Temple, but rather in a person – Jesus Christ. Jesus would take the place of the Temple where heaven and earth would meet. People would have direct access to the Father only through Christ. The early church knew this.

- Matthew recorded Jesus’ words in his Gospel: “I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.” (Matthew 12:6)
- God’s people would no longer go to a temple to worship God. They themselves would be the dwelling place of God through the Holy Spirit with the salvation brought by Christ as the foundation: “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.” (Eph. 2:19-22)
- The entire premise of the Book of Hebrews from which we read this morning is that Jesus Christ has replaced the old system of worship and has become the sole access to God the Father.

Jesus’s words to the Samaritan woman were prophetic and radical. He would change everything. All worship would now be focused on and through Jesus Christ. The way to worship the Father would be through Christ in spirit and in truth. The place doesn’t matter as it did in the Old Testament. Cathedrals or warehouses don’t make any difference. Books or screens don’t matter. Organs or guitars are not the question. Hymns or choruses hold no exclusive place before God. The truth is found in Jesus Christ. He must be the focus of Christian worship or it isn’t Christian. Revelation 5 – the worship that is now happening in heaven declares:

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain,
To receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
And honor and glory and blessing!

Revelation 5:12

Friends, we lost something very significant in the Reformation when our tradition eliminated weekly observance of the Lord’s Table. There were, of course reasons for the reformers’ reaction against the Catholic practice of the Eucharist. But we are greatly impoverished in our weekly worship without the profound focus on Christ that the Table brings. Without the Table, we must be very intentional to make Christ the central focus of our worship each week. All of

truth is found in Jesus Christ. (John 14:6) We dare not neglect this critical aspect of what it means to worship as a Christian.

Christ is truth. But what does it mean to worship “in spirit?” It means that we must authentically connect with God in the deepest level of our being – our spirit. There is no “playing games” with God. Authentic worship is not just the outward words and actions that we do. Biblical worship is more than an intellectual exercise. Genuine worship engages our heart – our will, our yearnings, our fears, our hopes – the deepest parts of our being. You see, you can do all the right things as the Jews did and still have your worship be detestable to God. Of those kinds of people, God said, “...this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me...” (Isa. 29:13)

How tragic! We can have the best music, sermons and worship forms. But unless we are honest before God and come to him at the deepest level of our hearts, then Jesus said we aren't worshipping. But friends, aren't we all like the Samaritan woman at the well? We all have our deep wounds that we try and hide from others. Like the woman, Jesus comes to us and invites us to be honest and real with him. And he invites to come and worship the Father in spirit and in truth through him.

What is God saying to you through this message?

So what is God saying to you through this message this morning? There's lots of information about how to worship according to the New Testament and the practice of the early church. That's nice, but how is going to change your life?

How do you come to worship? Do you come focused on Jesus and grateful for what he has done for you? Or are you looking for something to make you feel good: to hear the kind of message you want to hear and sing the songs you want to sing?

Do you come honestly and authentically with your life completely open before God? Why the charade? According to the Word of God, you're not really worshipping if you don't come honestly.

Don't waste your time and waste this opportunity. Jesus invites you: come and worship in spirit and in truth.