

APRIL 17, 2022

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Easter

SERMON April 10- Disciplines: Worship, John 4:20-24, Colossians 3:15-17, John 12:12-19

This morning, on Palm Sunday, we conclude our series on Spiritual Disciplines. The discipline we finish with fits well with today's occasion, worship. As we look at worship, we'll see a bit of a case study in what happened during the Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem.

First, let's take a moment to do what we've done for the past weeks, unpack some misunderstandings about worship.

Like the other disciplines, worship has suffered from a lot of man made baggage. There is what worship is and what people have made it. The ways it's been manipulated are as diverse as our traditions and personalities. For some worship must happen in a particular place. A sanctuary, a multi-purpose room. About 20 or 30 years ago I remember a push that "real" churches were home churches because that's largely what the early church was comprised of. This kind of thinking forgets that many times the way things are done is a product of necessity rather than biblical direction.

For some there must be an organ and hymns, others think that's too antiquated to be relevant and it has to be drums and guitars. For some prayer has to be elaborate and it's not church if there isn't great emotional experience. For others that's disrespectful and quiet reverence is required for worship to be worship. For some it's not church without a 45 minute sermon, for others that's too long and a sign that the preacher is rambling and can't boil down the point clearly. For some it needs to be hours long, others any longer than an hour is too long.

King David danced in worship in his skivvies or less through the streets as worship before God. No one wants that reenacted today I'm certain.

The truth is that none of this has anything to do with what scripture requires for worship. It's preference and any of it can either be genuine worship or a false representation of what worship is supposed to be. I read something recently that made me chuckle about church personalities. They person said Tell me what your pastor dresses like and I'll tell you about your church. Do they look like a businessperson, a hippie, a rapper, or a wizard?

Worship is, all boiled down, simply revering God. That's it. Each Sunday we do that in multiple ways. Prayer. Scripture. Praise through singing. Offering. Preaching. Study through Sunday school. Fellowship before and after. All of this done properly reveres God. This morning we have a special way of revering God as two children are baptized and vows taken by family, friends, and congregation to see the raised into relationship with God.

In John we see that worship isn't confined to a place, but rather a condition. The place is irrelevant. What is relevant is that we worship God in spirit and truth. We are focused on God, and what we offer is genuinely given to God as God is. Colossians paints for us a picture of completion. In all we do, make sure that Christ is centered and that we are centered on Christ. Intent and focus matters.

We'll see in a bit how this idea of what constitutes worship makes it FAR bigger than Sunday morning.

Palm Sunday though is a great example of both what worship can and should look like, and at the same time grossly what it's not.

As Jesus comes into the city there is this great ruckus. Somehow word had gotten out that this Messiah was coming in for the Passover and this particular crowd was exuberant. Symbolically on a donkey, entering as a king in the line of David Jesus arrives and rides in. The crowd cries "Hosanna!", waving palms and lying down their coats in a clear sign of reverence. God had sent their great deliverer and they were thrilled, reverent, and celebratory. This has all the aspects of wonderful worship.

They revered God in thanksgiving for what they perceived was about to happen. They were praising God and excited. Clearly this was its own kind of worship service. Not in a temple or church. Not under a tent. At a city gate making a carpet of their coats for a donkey. And, of course, a King on that donkey.

Something still wasn't quite right though. They weren't really worshipping the Jesus riding into that city. They were worshipping what they thought Jesus was riding into that city. To them He wasn't the spiritual redeemer of their souls. He was an earthly savior from the politics and oppression of the world, destined to put the Jews back on top of the power pyramid. They weren't cheering salvation from sin, but rather salvation from Rome. The actions revered a God that didn't exist in Jesus.

This is why our understanding of God, linked to all the other disciplines as well, is so important. The object of our worship is to be God. Not our image of God. The creation worships the creator. Not the creation worships a god that we have created. When the character and identity of God is twisted, our worship is misplaced and destined to be twisted as well.

No matter the style of worship, care must be taken to make sure the reverence and focus is on God.

Performance in worship isn't necessarily bad, but it has to be exercised with caution. In our culture, part of the focus in performance is on the performer. Particularly when one is gifted, there is temptation to perform for the sake of the accolades. There is temptation to want to be seen and praised. Similarly, those looking on are at risk of admiring the talent and skill over the message and meaning.

This doesn't necessarily apply to performance alone. This is being a musician or accompanist in worship, a song leader, a preacher, a lay reader. Anything that presents someone in front of the crowd has risk of allowing ego creep in and misplacing the reason for what is being offered and likewise the congregational pitfalls exist as well. Anytime the takeaway from worship is primarily admiring someone involved in it over drawing closer to God or growing in faith something is wrong. Anytime one of us walks away feeling more prideful for the praise rather than humbled by the privilege of being an instrument of God, something is wrong.

If worship is revering God, then God must be front in center for us. Anything else is a vehicle for God's Spirit to minister to us in the experience.

To go a step further, if worship is simply revering God then worship is not confined to the Sunday morning experience.

There isn't a moment of the day that we can't revere God. We do so by how we act, how we love one another, how we speak, how we prioritize, and so forth. Even the choices we make surrounding caring for ourselves falls into this. If our bodies are gifts, temples given to us by God, then how we care for them is an act of reverence towards God. Literally every moment we have the opportunity to revere God in our lives.

Make every aspect of life and act of worship. When we do this we touch the heart of God and God touches ours.

As we head into Holy Week, remember the celebration of Palm Sunday. But don't forget that as much as it is a lesson on vibrantly worshipping it is also a caution to remember to worship God as God truly is, in spirit and in truth. Perhaps we should focus less on the crowd and more on the ones walking in with Jesus, disciples. Likely they weren't jumping and waving with the crowd. They were doing what they'd done, humbly following Jesus where He went. Even though they didn't understand either, they followed. The week would get rough. They'd make mistakes and even go into hiding. But after the resurrection, they'd continue to do what they'd done. Follow Jesus and spread His story, His gospel of salvation. They would continue to revere Him with all they were and all they did in their lives. May we do likewise.

Bible Study: Acts 18

Paul's next stop on his journey is Corinth. Here he forms a relationship with a couple who share in his trade, tentmaking. This relationship furthers the point from chapter 17 we made regarding playing to our strengths and the notion that the common places we find ourselves in our jobs, hobbies, and so forth are often the richest and most logical places to start if we are looking to influence others for the sake of Christ.

Tradespeople are a community. There are guilds and such that bind people of a common trade together. There is common lingo and experience. People who all are in the same vocational walk share understanding that those of us outside their group will likely never have. Bonds naturally exist and form between us and others of our "tribe". So Paul works with this couple side by side. Long hours shared give wonderful opportunity for conversation and relationship. The relationship became such that Aquila and Priscilla accompany Paul as when he ultimately leaves Corinth, believers themselves and likely now partnering with Paul in mission.

It's noted that they were expelled from Rome with the other Jews. This gives us a couple insights. Something had happened in Rome where the Jews were seen as troublemakers and so they were kicked out of the city. It's important to remember that there would have been Jews who had come to faith in Christ in this wave of expelled Jews, of which Aquila and Priscilla are two. We also have a little backdrop for Paul's letter to the Romans. Part of the story behind that letter is that Christians who were still in Rome were now having to re-assimilate because the Jews had been allowed to return. This causes some friction as Gentile and Jewish Christians now had to reform their bonds and deal with culture clashes. Luke's word to us in Acts puts us in the expulsion phase whereas Romans is centered around the return.

A familiar scene plays out. Paul goes to the synagogue and meets with greater response from the Gentiles than the Jews. Once again he remarks that he's done with the Jews and to the Gentiles he will go. It's easy to take this as a blanket statement, but remember that everything is flavored by the surrounding circumstances. A Jew himself, of course Paul isn't completely done with the Jews. However, in Corinth in this situation he recognizes that his efforts to the Jews are largely wasted. He'll spend his time in more fruitful fields. Even today, difficult as it may be, sometimes we have to make a decision like Paul. We try and try and try and keep coming up short. We may not be able to put our finger fully on what the problem is, but the results speak for themselves. There's a reason Jesus said to "not cast your pearls before swine." Sometimes it's not the right time and place for people to hear what we offer. It's okay. There are others around who may be prepared. If we spend all our energy spinning our wheels in a place where the gospel is simply not going to take hold, we cheat those places that are ready from the opportunity. This isn't saying "give up easy" but rather is a call to discern the fullness of what God is calling us to in a greater scope of things.

Being somewhat "done" with the Jews in Corinth, Paul begins teaching in the home of Titus. He has given up tentmaking to focus solely on teaching and preaching. Even though he'd been largely unsuccessful with the Jews, Crispus who was head of the synagogue came to faith. As we've seen before, not only is it Crispus who believes but his entire household. While Paul preferred to begin in the synagogue, we are seeing here as with Lydia that the place where they gather isn't as important as why they gather. It's more about who they worship than where they worship. This echoes Jesus' statement in John to the woman at the well that the time was coming where location of worship wouldn't matter. What would matter is the heart condition of the one worshipping.

The conversion of Crispus has consequences. Obviously he will no longer be the head of the synagogue. For many this would be a crisis point. To give up a position of influence and stability is no easy thing. Yet he chooses Christ over his livelihood. This is an inspiring example for the rest of us regarding what steadfast faith looks like. Crispus is sacrifice in action. Would most of us be willing to take that bold step and relinquish our job and risk angering those we'd grown close to over the years for our faith?

Paul is reassured in a vision that God would keep him physically safe. It's not clear what precisely "having a lot of people" in Corinth looks like. The town had some believers already but likely not terribly widespread. Possibly this is encouragement for Paul that there is a ripe harvest awaiting his mission there. The people are ready, Paul just needs to go reel them in. He stays in Corinth for a full year and a half.

A scene plays out with Gallio. Once again Paul is dragged before the authorities because he's angered the Jews in the area. Gallio is the one who hears the case. They are trying to make Paul out to have done something illegal. What could that be? While the Jewish faith was a nuisance in Roman society what with their whole monotheism thing going on, they'd been grandfathered in and permitted to worship according to their law. Paul teaching something that might be Jewish adjacent, but violating some core Jewish teachings was being used to essentially accuse him of advocating a religion what was not legal within the Roman empire.

Gallio is a picture of not just neutrality, but almost harsh indifference. He doesn't have time for their nonsense and handily dismisses that case. This is an argument between Jews fussing over their own rules. It's not something for him to decide, nor does he care in the least. His indifference is demonstrated even further as Sosthenes, the new synagogue leader, is beaten by the crowd. Gallio does nothing. He does not care.

Why Sosthenes was beaten is debatable. It is possible that they were angry that he hadn't done his duty as their leader in sufficiently getting Paul handled. It's also possible that Sosthenes himself had joined Crispus in conversion and since Paul was released they took their anger out on him. Regardless, Paul is protected from harm, Sosthenes is not. But what we see here is a legal culture that seems to be starting to work in Paul's favor. In Athens the Areopagus simply asked Paul to share his ideas with them rather than making any kind of charges. Here Gallio has no desire to get in the middle of this religious spat. Roman neutrality can only work to Paul's favor as the Jews continue to try to stir things up for him.

The next stop on the journey is Ephesus. Paul deposits Aquila and Priscilla there to work. He went to the synagogue and then headed off towards Jerusalem after he's cut off his hair due to a vow. Eventually he ends up in his old stomping grounds, Antioch. Then he moves through another region visiting now existing communities of faith to help them deepen and strengthen their faith.

I had always wondered about this "vow" and cutting off his hair. Preparing this chapter, I came across something of interest in this regard. Cutting one's hair was often the vow of a Nazirite who consecrated themselves in service and dedication to God. The custom was that this was to be done in Jerusalem. In other circumstances, this vow could be taken outside of Jerusalem with the qualification that after the vow a pilgrimage is made to the holy city. This is likely what Paul did, and helps explain his abrupt departure from Ephesus accompanied by a promise to return if it was God's desire.

The chapter ends with Apollos. We hear mention of Apollos in Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Luke paints a picture of a bright, persuasive, faithful man. He is schooled enough to teach reliably and knows the scriptures. Alexandria is a city of culture and great learning. Luke speaks very highly of his abilities, except he's missing something.

Apollos is speaking from head knowledge.

While he may have a wonderful way with words, and even know a good deal about Jesus, he's only believed in the line of the baptism of John. He hadn't come fully into relationship with Christ, meaning the Holy Spirit hadn't yet come on him. He hadn't a reference point for this aspect of faith. So regardless of how brilliant he was, the key that we've seen all through the book of Acts was missing to unlock his full potential and a full faith in Jesus.

This is important. Head knowledge is good, and even necessary. It doesn't necessarily mean though that we have the Spirit. As much information as we may have command over, the piece that changes us and the world around us is the presence of the Holy Spirit. All through this book, Luke takes great care to make it clear that it is the Spirit that is gifting the apostles and other believers. The Spirit equips them to use whatever is at their disposal to persuasively share the gospel.

As this occurs in Ephesus, Paul's friends Aquila and Priscilla bring Apollos in and update him about the message about which he is speaking. Likely they are bringing him up to speed with all that's happened surrounding salvation, Pentecost, and the working of the Holy Spirit.

Apollos heads off now equipped to fully preach and teach Christ. There is a real sense that he is now filled with the Spirit as he goes to strengthen the believers. The closing verses that speak to his effectiveness and passion in "refuting" Jews and "proving" Jesus' identity using scriptures remind us of Peter early on in this book. Where does this passion and persuasiveness come from? The Spirit.

The Spirit through this chapter is present in assuring, empowering, guiding, converting, and more. Paul's adventures are inspiring and moving. More than the stories themselves, we focus on how he is given over to the Spirit, and how that weaves through and informs everything he does. From leading him to fellow tentmakers who become partners, to inspiring his teaching and arguing, to guiding and directing the stops and course of his journey we take from his example that we too can have this experience in our own unique ways on our own individual journeys.