

Chapel Hill United Church of Christ

Sunday Sermon

True Temple Worship

John 6: 63-69
1 Kings 8: 22-30, 41-43

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“...that your eyes might be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you said, ‘My name shall be there,’ that you may heed the prayer your servant prays toward this place.”

Prayer: Holy God, please open your eyes and ears to us in this house as we worship you that we may know you and feel your presence. Amen.

I may have shared this with you before, but have you heard what the mission statement for the Walt Disney Corporation is? The Center for Business Planning lists The [Walt Disney Corporation](#)'s mission statement as [“To make people happy.”](#) This means that everything from the very first Mickey Mouse to the latest movie called “Ponyo,” from the realistic hotel and resort industry to the futuristic city called “Celebration” located south of Walt Disney World, all of it is designed to make people happy. Everything Disney does is intended to measure up to this statement. It is the touchstone for the whole corporation.

Let's take a brief look at our mission statement (please recite it with me; it's on the screen and the cover of your worship bulletin): *We are a community of faith united with Jesus Christ, called together to carry one another's burdens, share one another's joys, and to testify to the presence of God in our world while worshipping God and striving for truth, justice, and peace.* This is our touchstone. Everything we do at Chapel Hill is intended to measure up to this statement.

I want to pick up on two of its phrases: “...united with Jesus Christ,” and “...while

worshipping God...” These two phrases, it seems to me emphasize the gist of true temple worship for us as Christians, namely first and foremost, our worship is focused on God in Christ. We are united in Christ, and as such we are called to do certain things, but we do them (key word here) WHILE we are worshipping God. In other words, worshipping God in Christ comes first. It happens and is already happening before we do anything.

The same emphasis is found in our texts for today. When King Solomon built the temple of God that his father King David wanted to build, Solomon had a big dedication ceremony. His prayer of dedication emphasized that even though God is way too expansive to be contained in one earthly construction, he hoped that God’s attention will focus on the worship in that temple... the very same place referred to when God said, “My name shall be there.”

When Jesus taught that his words are of the spirit and give new life, that his words are like manna from heaven, some of his followers didn’t buy it, making them temporary followers. They eventually ceased to follow Jesus anymore. “Will you also go away?” he asks the inner circle of disciples. Peter asks “Where else can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” Peter’s focus and emphasis was on Jesus; he was sent by God.

Our temple, this sanctuary, this sacred place, has both emphases as we come together to worship God in Christ first and foremost. God’s name is here because here is where we hear words of God’s good news, of sacred story, of God’s involvement in people’s lives, words of eternal life.

The trouble is that worship in our day and age is enmeshed in cultural trappings. Culture

will forever be a part of our worship, and on the one hand, that is a good thing. We use common cultural items and symbols, some from the ancient days, like the cross, the water of baptism, bread and wine or juice in Holy Communion, the table, and pulpit. We also use modern cultural items such as worship bulletins, hymnals, candles, screen, and PowerPoint projector systems, slides, etc. All these are good symbols and tools to use which help us to focus on the true worship of God in Christ.

But on the other hand, culture's presence in our worship is not such a good thing sometimes. Culture tends to say that the self is most important and that self-fulfillment or self-enjoyment are what worship is to emphasize. As a result, worship as a form of our entertainment becomes primary. People want worship to be meaningful for themselves. We want our senses to be pleased. Worship that is pleasing to God, however, becomes secondary.

I think that culture tends to say that worship as social time is primary, too. People often come to reunite with each other, to share in our friendships and grow in our relationships. That's not bad, but the problem is that worship as a time to grow our relationship with God becomes secondary.

Worship as a consumer-focused thing tends to have primary status, too. It's easy, isn't it, to confuse our hunger for God that is innate within every human being with the same yearnings that drive our consumer-focused society? Some folks search for the church with a worship service and with programs to meet their needs, and if the worship isn't doing that or the program is not there, then (whoosh!) they are gone. If the worship or program are meeting needs, then folks will put money in the offering plate thinking that their offering is in part

“paying for” the worship and program(s) that meet their family’s needs. The mentality is that “my pledge, my offering is buying what I desire, and I hope I get what I pay for.” Of secondary mindset is giving to the church because God has given so much to us.

These are all culture’s influence. And, the trap the church falls into, it seems to me, is that it to thinks it has to compete with other Sunday morning activities. Church needs to be entertaining, relational, and have the right kind of worship and/or programs in order to be relevant in people’s lives.

True temple worship suggests exactly the opposite. True worship focused on God in Christ is primarily about realizing what pleases God. It is primarily giving to God our very best selves, it’s about entertaining God. We may also end up being entertained, but that is secondary. Some Sundays we may not be entertained at all during our hour-long worship of God in Christ. If we try to make worship entertaining for ourselves, we will fall short.

Don’t you think true temple worship is also about coming into God’s presence and offering God our praise? Our thanks? Our love? Our confessions? Our hopes and dreams? These offerings are primary in worship. We may find comfort and meaning in offering God these thoughts, feelings, and words, but our comfort is secondary. If we try to make worship comfortable and meaningful on our own, we will fall short.

The truth is, God’s presence at times, may make us downright uncomfortable! Being in the place where God’s name is known, being in the place where words of eternal life are heard, where sacred story is told, being in the holy presence of God may challenge us uncomfortably. The current thoughts in our minds, the current feelings we have, the prevailing actions we do

may be subject to revision and change. We may not wish God's presence to lay those kinds of challenges to on our hearts! That is why Christian author Annie Dillard says that "It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may wake someday and take offense, or the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return" (Annie Dillard in *Teaching a Stone to Talk* <http://rmfo-blogs.com/karibeth/archives/category/introspection>, retrieved August 22, 2009).

Sometimes where we get drawn out to where we can never return is a result of true temple worship. Here in worship, God feeds us, God gives us strength, which are all secondary purposes for us being here, by the way. But, one result is that our vision changes! We see things through the lens of God's presence having moved us deeply. It's after we worship that we speak out for those who can't speak for themselves. It's after worship that we tend to each other needs... when we carry one another's burdens, share one another's joys, we testify to the presence of God in our world. It's after we worship when we strive for truth, justice, and peace.

The trouble is the public does not see our worship! The public only sees the resulting actions of worshiping. What happens then is that we look more like radical liberal protestors lobbying in politics, or leading demonstrations on the streets or capitol rotundas, or taking strong stances for peace and justice on the issues without the foundations of faith. The general society does not see the grounding in worship, the sustenance received from God's Holy Spirit. The general population does not know the view of life we have through the lens of the shared worship experience, of hearing God's word, or feeling God's presence.

In *Parting the Waters, Vol. I* by Taylor Branch (which is a history of the civil rights movement, there is a picture of a lunch counter in Nashville, Tennessee, circa 1960. Notice the white man and woman with the black American woman at the counter with their backs to the unruly crowd. The man has just had ketchup poured over his head. Notice he is not retaliating? Look at this second photo taken about a minute later. The woman in the middle now is getting sugar poured over her, and woman next to her has had something poured over her head. All because they were sitting, having a conversation together at this lunch counter. The point I am making is not to rile you up, play on your emotions, to get political in the pulpit, or to stand up for civil rights. That's often worship. My point is that I would guess that somewhere in the lives of these three individuals, something has affected their moral center about racism. Something has made them challenge the status quo of racism without committing violence to others, even though violence has come to them. I would like to imagine that their moral center was affected by their experiences of true temple worship... where the word of God heard in worship may have touched their hearts and encouraged them after worship to act justly.

I pray that our churches would engage in more true temple worship, let the public see that worship more, so that when people of faith act in other realms, such as in the political realm, or the corporate realm, or any other public realm, the general population will know what is our touchstone, from where we get our strength, and what is our mission. Amen.