

“Worship – What’s it All About?”

John 2: 13-22

While pastor at Summit Church, we had Youth Sunday on an annual basis. It was always a worship service the congregation looked forward to. Generally, it was a shorter service than the typical Sunday morning worship and parents were always proud of the efforts of their kids. And the congregational members were equally proud.

As a pastor, I was always a nervous wreck. I’m not sure why I was. I wanted the kids to do well, but I never knew what they were going to do. I did not have the privilege of being at the rehearsal or knowing the content.

And one year, it hit. Everything was set. Folks were in the sanctuary all ready to go. The service began as usual and was progressing until about five minutes into the service. When suddenly there was hollering and shouting by people - - the youth - - who were storming into the sanctuary. They were dressed in military fatigues and demanding that the worship service stop.

When everything got quiet, the instructions were clear: everybody sit down. Everybody pass in all hymnbooks and Bibles. The youth gathered all of the hymnbooks and Bibles and left the sanctuary.

A question was asked: “Now what are you going to do? It was really quite breathtaking. Poignant. Eerie. Powerful. Dramatic.

People began to stand up and quote favorite Bible verses. Suggested hymns to be sung were mentioned. A sense of community and unity developed and was created.

But the youth were very effective. When you take away all of the ‘worship props or aids,’ how will you worship? When you having nothing but yourself, how deep are your spiritual reserves? When others are not around to lead the worship how will you worship? What does worship really mean beside a weekly habit where others feed us and we just drink it in.

It was powerful and a good reminder about who and whose we are. Our scripture today is from John 2. It is often referred to as the Cleansing of the Temple. When Jesus upended the money changers as well as the sacrificial animal entrepreneurs.

This story is in a different place in John’s Gospel than in the other three Gospels. We refer to the other 3 gospels as the Synoptic Gospels because they contain the same stories, often the same language, and in a similar sequence.

In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the Cleansing of the Temple is at the end of Jesus’ ministry and was part of the impetus that became his crucifixion. He so offended the religious establishment that they had had enough and soon he was killed.

In John’s Gospel, the Cleansing of the Temple is told at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. He is just starting out his earthly ministry. And he creates a real mess in the Temple. He upends the traditions and normal procedures of the Jewish worship and faith.

Which I think is instructive. We have heard these stories so many times that we miss the significance of them. In addition, I think we miss the radical nature of Jesus. We have this blind notion of Jesus being meek and mild and gentle and caring. Yet in this story, we witness Jesus being really angry. In fact, mad as a hornet!

We also witness Jesus’ attempt to upend the religious establishment and the Jewish faith. I do not think we are appreciative of how radical Jesus is being in this story.

In fact, he reminds me of the Youth Group. Coming into the Temple, Jesus takes away all their props and practices and turns it all on its head. He was not merciful. He was angry and determined to under mind and change the religious practices of the day.

And what he was disturbed about was the selling of the animals for sacrifices as well as the money changers. It is some fascinating history about Jewish worship. In our particular story, it is Passover. The great festival that brought thousands of pilgrims to Jerusalem. Part of the practice given in the Torah was that worshippers had to bring an animal for a blood sacrifice. Since people travelled long distances, they could not bring appropriate animals for such distances. So in the Temple was a place for you to purchase sheep or cattle or doves or pigeons or other appropriate sacrificial animals. Which meant it had the sense of a stockyard including all the smells animals create plus all the “offerings” which they produce. It had to have an odor to it.

But in addition were the money changers. Since people, again, travelled great distances and came from various countries, they had all kinds of different coins. Upon arrival, they would exchange their coins for Tyrian coins because those coins were much more valuable in Jerusalem. Also, the coins were given as an offering and the money helped to fund the activities of the Temple.

So, you see that both activities - - animals for worship sacrifice and coins for Temple necessities - - were part of the regular operations of the Temple.

Jesus enters the Temple. He makes a whip out of cords, and he drove all of the animals out of the Temple. Imagine that mess and confusion. He also turned over the tables of the money changers and they dove under the tables to retrieve the scattered coins. It was a mess. Until that moment, everyone was doing the job they had always done and doing it according to practice. Jesus was a radical.

Fast forward to the Winter, 2021, with the arrival of a new pastor on Black Cat Road at the South Plains Presbyterian Church. On about the beginning of month two of the new pastor, you arrive at church and there is no bulletin. There is not order of worship outlined. Four people are up front on the right side where the organ used to be. Guitars, bongos, and drums filled the old choir loft. The pastor enters for worship in a turtleneck sweater, no tie, no robe, and makes the following announcement: Welcome to worship on this the Lord’s Day. Things are going to be different at SPPC.

The pastor goes on to say, you have become so accustomed to your liturgy and order of service, we are going to change things up. Every first and third Sundays, we will follow the traditional order of service with the organ, hymns, and choir. On the second and fourth Sundays, we will be casual. Informal. No structured service. We will pull in a screen for a video that is part of the sermon. We will have a personal testimony in the service. And we will just worship God in Spirit and the Truth. On fifth Sundays, it is a Sunday off for you to gather in nature and be quiet for God to speak to you.

Then what? Just imagine the conversations around the community. Just imagine persons in the church huddling during coffee hour. Just think of who would have walked out of that service with those announcements. Just imagine.

Selfishly, I am tickled to death I am no longer the General Presbyter as my phone would have lit up at 12:15 that day!

I do think this description parallels what Jesus did in the Temple. It would be that radical. It would be that earth shattering.

And, so what would you do after you calmed down about Tuesday morning?

You see Jesus was raising the question of the meaning and purpose of worship in the Temple. He declared in verse 16, “you shall not make my Father’s house a house of trade.” In verse 19, Jesus described a sign for them, “Destroy this Temple and in three days I will raise it up.” They were clueless of what he was talking about. They thought he was referring to the destruction of the Temple and he could rebuild it in three days! What he was referring to was the Temple of his body!

Jesus is asking, “Where is your worship focused?” What is the purpose of your worship? Why do you show up every week - - just to see people and to be seen by others - - or is there more?

The Presbyterian Church’s Directory for Worship has a beautiful description about the intention and purpose of worship. It says,

“Worship gives all glory and honor, praise and thanksgiving to the holy Triune God. God acts with grace. We respond with gratitude.”

Worship is our response to God that comes out of deep gratitude. Gratitude for creating us. Gratitude for saving us. Gratitude for empowering us. Gratitude for loving us.

A worship service is true worship when we respond with thanks and gratitude. It is not worship if we feel obligated to worship. It is not worship if we just show up. It is not worship if we just go through the motions.

True worship occurs when we are grateful for all we are and have and we come to praise and adore God because of our gratefulness and gratitude.

Often, I wonder who the “audience” is in worship. And it is so appropriate that God is the audience. Not the preacher. With all due respects, not the musicians. Not the congregation. Not the readers in various parts of the service. We are not the ‘stars!’ God is! We are not performers trying to do something perfect and without flaw to get rave reviews. Instead we are God’s

children just grateful we can worship and allow our gratitude to spill out all over God for his mercy and grace.

Now, just to get something going. And also to challenge ourselves, what would happen if a group of folks met and developed a worship service that consisted of various parts that had one purpose in mind: to express our gratitude to God. Grateful worship. What would it look like and how would we respond?

It is clear to me that going forward, we in the church must develop worship services that speak to the needs of the people. They may be different from what we customarily call worship. But they would be developed for people to be able to express their gratitude to God for what God has done in their lives.

I think the approach to that worship is about our gratitude to God and could open up some meaningful and powerful worship experiences. Times when God’s Spirit is alive and well. Times when our faith depends. Times when God touches us.

If we are not careful, our worship can become stale, lifeless, and routine. Which was happening in the Temple. Jesus had to come and clean out all of the tired practices as well as the stinking animals so worship could be real.

It is not impossible to think that Jesus could do that again - - here - - in our presence.

To God be the Glory!