

**SCRIPTURE TEXT:** Psalm 96:1-9

**SERMON TITLE:** Opening to God: Worship

Lent is a time of preparation. We're preparing for Easter and the new life that God brings through Jesus Christ—so it's a good time to practice opening ourselves to God. And that's where our focus is over these Sundays of Lent. We're exploring together some basic spiritual disciplines that open us to God. This morning our focus is on the spiritual discipline of worship.

#### SCRIPTURE READING

Can I be honest with you? Sometimes I really don't want be here on Sunday mornings for worship. I wish I could say that each and every week I hop out of bed rearing to go—excited to be spending another Sunday morning with God's people in worship. Sometimes that's the case—but often its not.

I'm hate to admit it, but after 55 years as a Christian, there is still a part of me that wants to be completely autonomous. There is a part of me that wants to live as if there is no God to worship—so that my life and my time can be wholly and completely my own without having to give thought to God and the kingdom and the way of Christ, and all the rest.

Come to think of it, there was actually a time in my life when I tried to live like this. Now I grew up in the church—which means that there were many, many times when I was made to go to worship. Oh what my mom and dad put up with on Sunday mornings trying to get me and my two brothers up for church. It got especially difficult for them when I hit adolescence. I didn't want to be in worship. It was boring—and I resented being made to go. So when I graduated high school in 1970 and went far, far away from home—all the way from Beeville to Lubbock and Texas Tech—I pretty much stopped going to worship. Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty, I was free at last!

But then, in my senior year at Tech, I made friends with a guy whose dad was the pastor at Oakwood UMC in Lubbock. My friend invited me to sing in the church choir so I told him I'd check it out. And lo and behold, I discovered that I had missed the worship of God. I discovered that there is something within me that needs to worship God—even though I still wrestled with that part of me that wanted to be autonomous. It was this struggle within me that motivated me to become disciplined in my worship participation, because I knew that if I wasn't disciplined, it would be awfully easy to yield to that autonomous spirit within me—and I didn't want to do that.

So once I chose to go—and disciplined myself to go with a heart that is open to God—with a heart that is seeking God—I discovered that God is indeed present amongst the people in worship—and I found myself becoming more and more open to God's presence and to God's way in the world—and since that time, I haven't missed many Sundays of worship. And I've discovered that the times when I don't want to be here are the times I most need to be here.

And get this, by coming to worship, I'm learning to worship. To pick up the language of the psalm: I'm learning how to join the creation in singing a new song to the Lord. I'm learning how to bless God's name. I'm learning how to tell of God's salvation from day to day. I'm learning how to declare God's glory among the nations. I'm learning how to praise God and to honor our creator. I'm learning how to turn away from idols and find glory in God rather than in myself alone. Worship, after all, is not first and foremost about me—or about what I get from worship; it's about God and what I give in worship. I'm learning how to find strength and beauty of God's presence within the sanctuary. I'm learning how to offer myself and my gifts to God. I'm learning how to acknowledge the rule of God in my life and in the world. And every time we gather for worship I come to understand just a little bit more about why the psalmist

said: *Worship the Lord*—and why Jesus said: *You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.*

There's something else I've discovered. By disciplined participation in worship experiences like these, I'm practicing what it means to live every moment of my life as an act of worship. Paul wrote in the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans: *I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.* Paul is talking here about worship not as an event, but as a lifestyle. This is the goal—all of who we are offered to God every moment of every day.

So what we do here is practice—its practice for living a life of worship. Mother Theresa told this story. She writes: *I remember one of our sisters, who had just graduated from the university. She came from a well-to-do family that lived outside of India.*

*According to our rule, the very next day after joining our society, the postulants must go to the home for the dying destitute in Calcutta. Before this sister went, I told her, "You saw the priest during the Mass, with what love, with what delicate care he touched the body of Christ. Make sure you do the same thing when you get to the home, because Jesus is there in distressing disguise."*

*So she went, and after three hours, she came back. That girl from the university, who had seen and understood so many things, came to my room with such a beautiful smile on her face. She said, "For three hours I've been touching the body of Christ!"*

*And I said, "What did you do? What happened?"*

*She said, "They brought a man from the street who had fallen into a drain and had been there for some time. He was covered with maggots and dirt and wounds. And though I found it very difficult, I cleaned him, and I knew I was touching the body of Christ!"* (Benenate, Becky,

editor. *Mother Teresa: In the Heart of the World*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1997, pages 55-56.)

For this sister, what happened in worship during Holy Communion became practice for living a life of worship.

My brothers and sisters, worship is a spiritual discipline that opens us to God.