

Real Faith for Real Life: Worship

Lesson: **John 4:23-26; Hebrews 10:19-25**

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?version=31&search=John%204:23-26;%20Hebrews%2010:19-25>

This is the second week of our look at Real Faith for Real Life. Over these six weeks we are developing personal and corporate practice of what Michael Foss calls “the six marks of discipleship.” The six marks are prayer, worship, reading the Bible, service, connectedness, and generosity. Or, to use the active verbs, since these are all activities: Praying, Worshipping, Reading the Bible, Serving, Relating, Giving. Mike Foss gives these an acronym: PWR SRG. Power Surge. The marks of a soul that is fully alive in God – a soul with a power surge – are praying, worshipping, reading the Bible, serving, relating, and giving. Since we want everyone to have a life that is fully alive in God – that is, a real life – together we’re going to learn about and practice these marks.

Throughout history, humans have worshipped. All cultures, all epochs, all peoples, have opened their hearts and souls to God’s presence. We have perceived God differently, named God differently, but we have always worshipped God. We have always sensed God’s eternal presence, and sought to connect with God.

Recent studies have suggested that our brains are “hardwired” to connect with God. It appears that we are made with a God-shaped niche in our biochemical structure. Our bodies long to be filled with God.

Though science is just finding its own justification for this God-connection, humans have always known, deep in our souls, the importance of connecting with God through worship. Our own scriptures recognize that need and encourage us to devote ourselves to worshipping God. “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God.” (Deut. 6:5) “Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.” (Exodus 20:8) “The Sabbath was made for humankind.” (Mark 2:27) And, after Jesus was resurrected from the dead, and ascended into heaven, the disciples – our ancestors in faith – gathered faithfully together for worship, fellowship, and teaching. (Acts 2, ff.)

We were made to worship, and God set aside time in our weekly living just for that purpose. But many of us don’t seem to value worship – we don’t seem to really understand what it’s for, or why it should be part of our real lives. God gave us weekly Sabbath, but many of us consider ourselves “regular” worshippers if we attend once a month. Yet worship is central to our faith; it is both one of the six marks of discipleship and one of the five purposes of a church. But worship is also the glue that ties us to both God and our soul support system called the church.

I think our lackadaisical commitment to worship springs out of some set of fundamental misunderstandings about what worship is, and is for. Worship is the apprehension and reverence of God. Worship has an aspect of awe and respect to it, but it is more than just the feelings of awe and respect. Worship is the apprehension – the palpable awareness – and reverence of God.

I want to get something out of the way, right away. I’ve had people tell me that they do not need to practice communal worship because they worship in nature or on the golf course, or when singing with their community chorus. I think what they mean is that they experience calm, or awe, or joy. These are all good feelings, and I firmly believe that the more joy and awe you can get into your life the better off you’ll be. But the feelings should not be confused with worship. Nor should the objects of our activity be confused with God. Trees, and golf, and Bach are not God. God is God. Unless we are revering God, we are not worshipping.

So what is worship? Mike Foss has said that “Worship is our heart’s response to the God who is worthy of our honor.” Worship is a response by our souls to the God who is worthy of receiving that response. The experience of worship is God’s invitation to get to know God. Through worship, we are invited to turn our souls away from the

daily. We are invited to turn from the trivial. Through worship, we are invited to turn from the tiny petty gods that would enslave us heart and soul and mind and body, and we are invited to be caught up instead in the presence of the powerful, creative, saving and freeing love of God the eternal.

One of my most memorable experiences of worship happened when I was living in San Francisco. I happened to get off the bus at my usual stop, a couple of blocks from my apartment in the lower Haight district. On this day, an elderly black man, with a white cane, got off there too. The man seemed somewhat confused and disoriented, so I offered my assistance. It turned out that he was a bit disoriented, so I offered to walk with him a while. As we walked up the hills, and out of the Haight into the Fillmore district, he told me of his life, and what the Fillmore had been like in its heyday of jazz and blues and African-American community life. He pointed to landmarks that he could no longer see, that were in fact no longer there, and helped me to see them. I don't know how long we walked, but at some point we came to where he was going, and said goodbye. As I turned from him, I felt the unmistakable fullness of God's presence, God's grace pressing upon me, past my clothes and skin and filling my entire body and soul with thick and luxuriant light. In response, I began to weep, and to thank God for all her gifts, for the opportunity to be with that man, for guiding me to take the time, for blessing me with life. That is worship – the apprehension and reverence of God.

The tricky piece is that no one, not even the best worship experience designer in the world can make us worship. No worship event, no retreat, no stadium concert, no silent meditation, no forest glen, no monkish singing can make us worship. Not even God can make us worship. Worship is what we do when we experience God and revere God.

But that God-shaped niche in our souls begs to be filled. The God above all Gods yearns to be known by us, and our deepest beings ache to be filled by God's power and love. This is why we practice worship, and commit ourselves to putting ourselves at least once a week in a place and time whose sole purpose is worship.

That is what worship is for – to apprehend, experience, and revere God. And we come to communal worship to practice worshipping. We come to this time in order to put ourselves in the position of doing nothing else but concentrating on apprehending, experiencing, and revering God for an hour or two. As it happens, the more we do that, and the better we do it, the more we will actually worship, inside and outside the church building.

Still, there remains the problem of coming and spending an hour or two here, and not worshipping. It may be that you have never worshipped inside church – you've attended, but you haven't worshipped. Once you've committed yourself to weekly worship, it's time to look at how you're going about worship.

One of my very favorite philosophers (you did know you have a pastor with favorite philosophers, right?), Soren Kierkegaard is said to have told this story: "It was Sunday morning in Duckland, and all the ducks dutifully came to church, waddling through the doors and down the aisle into their pews where they comfortably squatted. (*I imagine the lady ducks in frilly bibs and elegant large hats, the gentlemen ducks with starched breast feathers and shiny webbed feet.*)

When all the ducks were well-settled, and the hymns had been sung, the duck minister waddled to his pulpit. The duck minister opened the Duck Bible and proclaimed: 'Ducks! You have wings, and with wings you can fly like eagles.' He pounded the pulpit with his own wing, and the congregation stamped their feet. 'You can soar into the sky!' the duck minister continued, 'Use your wings!'

It was a marvelous, elevating duck reading from the Duck Bible. The ducks were astonished, and moved to tears and shouts of celebration. All the ducks quacked their assent with a hearty 'Amen!'. They

resolved to tell the duck minister how much they liked the message, and how glad they were they had come. And then the ducks plopped down from their pews and waddled home.”

Sound familiar? You come into communal worship and hear about flying, and how you can fly, and then you just waddle home. You leave unchallenged and unchanged. This is a deep tragedy, because genuine worship transforms us. You cannot experience and revere God without being changed. In Romans 12, Paul encourages the Jesus-followers in Rome: “I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” To worship genuinely, you have to offer yourself to the experience of worship, and be open and eager to being transformed.

You have to be open and eager to being changed by God. Too many folks have misconceptions about what they’re doing here an hour or two a week. Some people see worship as a filling station – a place where they get filled up and fed so that they can do their other life better. They’ll stop going to worship because “they don’t get fed”, as if they were infants, unable to feed themselves on the bread of life. Some folks see worship like a giant pep rally, or a halftime show, with the preacher and the musicians as cheerleaders and performers. They come to be entertained. All these folks tend to view worship as something done TO them or FOR them, rather than BY them.

Churches have contributed to these misconceptions by calling this time a worship “service”, as if worship was about your being served by others – fed by God or entertained by the preacher and the musicians. Preachers have contributed to these misconceptions by smiling and nodding when someone says “nice service” or “nice sermon”, instead of asking, “what about you changed, and what will you do differently now?” And worship planners have contributed to these misconceptions by designing worship around what made people feel comfortable, rather than what moved them.

Worship isn’t a *service* – to be done for you by others. Worship is what you do when you apprehend, experience, and revere God. It is good to be filled up and energized, to be given hope and to find community. But worship is more than that. Worship is so much more than that. Worship is the giving of all of ourselves to God. The practice of worship – the weekly disciplined activity – is for the purpose of deliberately and intentionally encountering the God above all gods, the eternal, beautiful, mighty, powerful, and purposeful God of the universe. Worship is you and God communing together. And you cannot help but be changed when you commune with God.

So how do practice worship? How do you as a worshipper prepare for authentic worship to happen?

1) You have to have a proper attitude about God. If your God is able to be contained and understood by your mind in careful linear thinking, your God is too small. If you can get enough of God in an hour of sitting back and having worship done to you, your God is too small.

God is beyond anything we can imagine, and is embedded in everything that is. God is good beyond our worthiness, powerful beyond our imagining, and holy beyond description. When you practice worship, you must begin by focusing your attention on that God, for it is only that God who is worthy of your reverence. Don’t come in looking for a nice little package of God that you can take away and put on your nightstand. If you want a God who will just tidy up your present life, you’re looking in the wrong place. Our God is an awesome God, who is willing and able to give you radical and life-giving communion with the One Eternal. But you have to come in open to the astonishing majestic beyondimaginingness of God. You have to come in ready and willing to be overwhelmed, amazed, and transformed. So that means ...

2) You have to have a proper attitude about yourself. If you allow yourself to come fully into the presence of God, and open yourself to being changed by God, you're going to discover that you're not "all that". You will realize your sin — that is, the ways in which you turn from God and God's intentions for you. You will realize your size — that you are much smaller and much weaker than you pretend to be the other 143 hours of the week. You will realize your status — that you are utterly unworthy to be loved by the God above all gods. And you will realize the mystery of God's blessing: that you are adored by God. You are a beloved child of God. God loves you as if you were God's only child. You cannot earn that. You cannot coerce that. You cannot bargain for that. It just is — you are small, frail, broken, and yet loved beyond all understanding. It's painful to have to face our failings honestly. Most of us don't do it. When we pray during worship, we pray for others rather than confront our own failings and limitations. We don't openly and honestly name that we are in need of healing, and saving, and love. We don't admit we are desperately in need of forgiveness. And we can't bear to think about how much we need hope, and God's promise of full life. But if you are going to worship — to apprehend, experience, and revere God — you must lay yourself bare before God, and before others. When Jesus went to wash Simon Peter's feet, Simon Peter was ashamed, and begged Jesus not to do it. But to truly experience genuine worship, we must be willing and open to being washed clean — of our pain, of our shame, of our guilt, and of our pride.

So authentic worship requires a proper attitude about God which leads to a proper attitude about ourselves, which leads to ...

3) A proper attitude about your daily life, your real life. Worship doesn't stop with the personal mystical experience. That's the problem with the nature/golfcourse/chorus kind of worship. It's also the problem with mind-altering, or mind-numbing, drugs, of course. Worship is also the apprehension and reverence of God in our daily lives. We practice communal worship weekly to be able to live personal worship daily. As Paul said in Romans, authentic worship of God is the presentation of your life as a living sacrifice — a living gift to God and to the world of everything you are.

When you are open to God and being touched by God and being transformed by God, when you worship, you will want to live it out in your daily life, your real life. And practicing worship helps you stay in that place of surrender, openness, and grace.

Through the weekly practice of recognizing and revering God in worship, we come to see things as God sees them. I encourage you to commit to worshipping every Sunday for six months. See what that feels like. When we do, when we worship in spirit and truth weekly, we begin to see ourselves as God sees us — both divinely loved and humanly broken. And our perspective on everything else starts to change. That makes worship dangerous, risky business. When we worship in spirit and in truth, we turn our perspective and our lives over to the adoration and experience and service of God. And when we genuinely worship, we stop waddling home the way we came in. We find our wings.

Let us pray: God, give us the courage to face you the way you are — awesome, powerful, and compassionate. Give us the humility to face the way we are — full of promise by virtue of having been made in your image, but damaged by sin and a broken world. Give us the desire to be transformed through worship beyond who we are into who we might be — the image of the living Christ. Teach us to worship you in spirit and truth. Open us up, turn us out, make us into living sacrifices, daily offerings of love and justice in your world. Bring us back to each other and to you. We ask this in the name of Jesus. *Amen.*