

“Getting Back to the Heart of Worship”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens

BASED ON THE THEME, “GETTING BACK TO THE HEART OF WORSHIP”

Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.

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Matthew 22: 34-40

³⁴Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. ³⁵One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question:

³⁶“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

³⁷Jesus replied: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ ³⁸This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

A lot of people think worship is a strange, boring, almost deadly experience. One little boy was looking at a plaque with names and little American flags on it outside the sanctuary in his church when the pastor came up to him. He said, “Dr. Havens, who are those people whose names are on that plaque?” The pastor replied, “those are people who died in the service.” The little boy said, “Oh, which one, the 9:00 or the 10:30 one?”

We are about to embark on a new journey. Over the next six weeks we are going to try to go back home in a sense. We are going to “get back to the heart of worship.” So, over the next six weeks I will be reflecting on what we do in worship, and why. I will invite you to consider your own attitudes and practices of worship. I hope to challenge all of us to find

deeper meaning in worship and to find ways to worship more “faith-fully.”

We start this morning with this passage of Scripture that doesn’t outwardly appear to have anything to do with worship. It doesn’t mention the word at all. Yet if we consider it’s focus then we will see it is all about worship in the fullest sense of that word. Let’s look at this passage in a little more detail and see how it relates to our theme of “Getting Back to the Heart of Worship.”

It is exam time at the Jerusalem Theological Seminary. The professors are quizzing a student they don’t think much of. They have been sending various doctors of theology in to ask Jesus tricky questions about God. It hasn’t been going so well for the doctors of theology. So far it was chief priests and lawyers, Pharisees, and Sadducees 0, Jesus 3. The Department of Phariseism was going

to take one more wack at it since they heard that the Professors of Sadduceeism had struck out. They send their very best pitcher in. He was an “expert” in the law. I suppose his question must have seemed quite clever to him, but if you ask me it was a pretty lame attempt. If he was attempting to throw a curve ball it must have slipped coming out of his hand. What question is more obvious than “which commandment is the greatest?” The smallest player on the Jerusalem Little League could have hit that melon out of the ballpark. I can almost hear Jesus smirking as he answers, “The greatest commandment is this: Love Yahweh your God with all your heart, soul, and mind.” Then he adds, “and, oh, by the way, the second part of that is, love your neighbor as yourself. All the law and the prophets hang on this.” Bingo, bango, bongo. Yard. Goodbye. “It’s outa here!”

Now, as I said, this passage doesn’t use the word “worship,” but if we understand what worship really is we can understand how this fits. Worship is, at its heart, loving the real God with all your heart, soul, and mind. Worship is the way we express that as a community gathered together.

Is there one right way to worship God? No. Is there only one way to express your love to your beloved? No. So some people express their love for God with Gregorian chants and some with rock guitars and

drums and some with hymns from the Pilgrim Hymnal. Some express their love for God by loudly shouting “gibberish” words that come from the Spirit within them and some do it by gathering “decently and in good order” and by quiet contemplation. Some express their love for God in liturgy printed on a paper bulletin and others look up at big screens mounted on the walls. Rather than sit in judgment that some people aren’t authentically worshipping let’s ask ourselves how we can make our worship more authentic.

One Sunday School teacher suggested her kids write a letter to God about worship in their church. One little girl brought hers back the next week. It read, “Dear God, we had a good time in worship at our church this morning. Wish you could have been there!” Now that really gets to the heart of it doesn’t it? We can argue about how we worship but it is far more important whether we are aware of God’s presence with us when we worship.

So let’s get beyond the forms of worship, and take a moment to honestly ask our selves who and what we are worshipping. Our religion claims we are monotheistic. We worship one God. But the truth is none of us are truly monotheistic. We all worship at many altars. Let me suggest a few:

Many of us worship tradition. That is, we worship the way we worship. We think that because we are

comfortable with this or that form of religious expression it is the only right way and therefore it cannot be changed. I have used the example before but before there were organs in churches they used bands. Organs allowed smaller churches that did not have bands to have the sound of a full orchestra. But when it first came out some people called the organ “the devil’s own pipes.” Then when bands started taking the place of organs many folks thought the devil was in the rock and roll the bands were playing. Neither organ nor guitar and drums are necessarily godly or demonic. There is no music that is necessarily “sacred” in God’s eyes. Now before you go getting all nervous that the purpose of this series or the purpose of this worship grant is for us to bring in a rock band complete with electric guitars and drum set next week, relax. That isn’t my point or my intention. My point is that we often think because that is the way we have always done it that that is the only way to truly worship. That is worshipping tradition.

Here’s another example in our wider culture that also infects many of us. We worship technology. Oh, I don’t just mean those of you who are addicted to your “Crackberry” or your Facebook games, or the television or computer you sit in front of for hours. I mean we truly believe that technology, that human science, can save us. We forget that human technology has also given us nuclear

weapons, environmental crises, ethical conundrums in healthcare, and other issues that you and I have probably not even thought of yet. But many of us believe that somehow technology will solve every problem. And so we worship its ability while we believe that God is powerless and best and a malevolent being who causes evil and suffering at worst.

Want another example of our pagan worship? How about power? We worship power as a savior. Why else did we invent nuclear weapons and then use them to control the world? Why else do we have the political fights we have now that aren’t over what is truly best for everyone they are about who has the power to make decisions and who wants it. If we don’t worship power, then why is it that we trust our weapon systems and military to keep us safe but we sneer at truly practicing the ethics of Jesus who called us to love our neighbor as ourselves? Trust me, he didn’t mean we should try to walk around with warm, fuzzy feelings about the guy next door who annoys us when he uses his gas blower on the yard too early in the morning. He meant the kind of tough love that seeks justice for the person who lives over on the northside with the same passion we want justice for ourselves. But we live in fear that somehow if we seek to see all people treated with equal respect and fairness that somehow it will diminish our power or our pocketbook or our safety.

Here's the toughest one. I believe that at the heart of all false worship, including the ones I have named, we worship fear. I think we are afraid and that's why we don't love our neighbor as ourselves. I think we are afraid that God can't or won't save us and that's why we worship technology and power. I think we have let fear steal our love for God and our trust in God and our desire to worship God with our whole hearts, souls, and minds.

So how do we get back to the heart of worship? I think we have to get back to the heart of God. You see the commandment to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind is simply an invitation to respond to the astounding love of God. The truth is the more we realize we are in the heart of God the more we will be able to get back to the heart of worship.

Kate Huey, who writes a weekly column for the UCC, [i.UCC@ucc.com] shares this about how the heart of God forms our worship. She says, "Why is the sanctuary of a temple or a church "sacred ground"? Perhaps because it is God's dwelling place (even though God is always with us, everywhere), or simply a focus point, a base camp, a reminder, a haven, all in the name, and care, of God. In all of the sacred places of our lives, where we are at home with God, our voices rise with those of all creation--the birdsong of the sparrows and the swallows--in praise of God's goodness, in gratitude

for a God who draws near to us, a God who cannot be contained by the farthest reaches of the highest heaven. Who could not be filled with awe at such a God?" I would add, who could not be filled with love for such a God?

So, here's what worship is at the heart of it. It is expressing our love for God, and reminding our selves of God's love for us. It is the way we tell each other we are in the heart of God, and the way we tell God that God is the center of our heart, soul, and mind. So take a deep breath. Over the next few weeks we will look at some ways worship shapes us as we think about how we shape worship.

And before you go, I just want to assure you I understand how difficult worship can be. After listening restlessly to a long and tedious sermon, a six-year-old boy asked his father what the preacher did the rest of the week. "Oh, he's a very busy man," the father replied. "He takes care of church business, visits the sick, ministers to the poor...and then he has to have time to rest up. Talking in public isn't an easy job, you know."

The boy thought about that, then said, "Well, listening ain't easy, either!" Thank you for listening to me even when it "ain't easy!" Amen.