

8 March 2015

Acts of Worship
Matthew 6:1, 5-6, 16-18

Last week, we talked about the importance of worship, which is not just going to the Sunday service at church but rather is what happens wherever and whenever we gather with others to express our love for God. We even brainstormed together some of the ways that we do that. Some of those ideas are printed on the insert in your bulletin, and the rest are posted on the window in the Wesleyan Room. It would appeal that some of us feel strongly about worship, and we should: there are simply some things that need to be done *together*. Doing them in community changes their chemistry, their impact, their power. No wonder Hebrews 10:25 warns us not to neglect our “assembling together.” We need it.

But there are dangers in doing things in groups as well. When we do things in company, it is easy for us to think of the others as our audience and to pay more attention to what *they* think than we do to what we’re actually doing, and why we’re doing it. A woman goes into a profession that she loves but in the competitive world of business begins to worry more about impressing the boss and outshining her co-workers that she forgets about doing the job well because it’s worth doing. It’s a thing that happens. Someone hosts a dinner party for friends but worries so much about what others will think that in the effort to see that the house is spotless, the food perfect, the table beautiful the whole point of the dinner party – enjoying a meal with people you love – is lost. Recognize that? Then there’s the phenomenon of mob behavior. For whatever reason, people will do things in groups that they would not dream of doing alone. Gang violence, looting after disasters, religious wars – all these are examples of the evil side of “together.”

Even our worship can be tainted by the dark side of groups. Even here, we can succumb to the temptation to go through the motions for show, so that other people can see how pious we really are. We can forget God and perform for the group. Now, it may not be so obvious here. Our style of worship isn’t as showy as that of some other churches – we don’t have people trying to outdo each other in speaking in tongues or dancing in the aisles, at least not usually – but we are just as susceptible as anyone to putting on a false front in our worship, with our mind more on what others are thinking than on God. This is why Jesus warns us, in Matthew 6:1, *Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.*

Instead, Jesus stresses that we must have a private dimension to our love for God as well. Our worship must not be just crowd behavior – it must arise from within ourselves, and it must be sustainable even after the crowd is gone and we are alone. Again from Matthew 6: *And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you* (vv. 5-6). We talked last week about the power of praying in the presence of others, of sensing the community speaking to God in chorus, but we must also be able to speak to God alone.

And it isn't as easy as it sounds. This past Wednesday, in our book discussion around the fire, we spent a long time sharing notes on how to sit in silence and actually focus on God, how to accept the distractions that come and then move past them. But behind the discussion was the shared conviction that, once you've figured out how to have a regular time of private prayer, it changes your perspective and transforms your life.

Loving God in private is more than just having a time of quiet prayer though. So now, let me ask you: What works for you? Think for a moment about times when you have been alone and known that you were in the presence of God. When has the love of God – and love *for* God – filled you, one to one? In your bulletin today are little pink slips, and I'd like to invite you to take a moment and write out one or two examples of how you have sought God in private. We'd like to share these with each other, like the slips from last week. Where have you found God's grace alone?

[*Pause for conversation in the congregation..*]

Here's one that nobody mentioned, a spiritual practice that figures prominently in John Wesley's "means of grace," as well as in the Bible. I'm speaking of fasting – intentionally going without food for a time so as to focus more fully on God. This is not a practice for everyone. Diabetics, don't do this. (Ask *your* doctor if you're healthy enough for fasting activity!) But if it's possible for you, think about it. Maybe just go one day, from supper one evening until supper the following evening. It's not as hard as it sounds. Yes, you get hungry, but that hunger goes away in ten or fifteen minutes all by itself. And, though I'm not sure I can explain why, many have found the practice to have a sharpening effect, even a cleansing effect, enabling them to be more aware of God during the day, and more grateful to God for their food when they break the fast. But if you do fast, remember this: It's just between you and God. As much as you might want people to know that you are doing this thing, keep it to yourself. One more reading from Matthew 6: *And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you* (vv. 14-16).

The point of this passage – and of my whole sermon – is that we need to love God in both ways: in community and in privately. Either one without the other is dangerous. If our love for God is only expressed when we are with others, then it can become an act put on for their sake, a demonstration of piety for a human audience. We need the internal dimension as well. But it works the other way, too. If our love for God is only expressed privately and never shared in community, we can very easily end up in our own world, preening ourselves on how holy we are. We need other people and their different perspectives. We need to be able to see our religious behavior and hear our religious opinions through the perspectives of others. So, again, our love for God needs both public and a private expressions.

When we have both dimensions to our journeys of faith, though, then we have a good start toward learning how to love the Lord our God with all our hearts *and* minds *and* being *and* strength.