

Great Ends of the Church II: The maintenance of divine worship
Based on Amos 5: 18-24 and Luke 11:1-13
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This is week two of our six-week series looking at the Great Ends of the Church, those six lofty goals articulated for our tradition in 1910 and still a part of our Book of Order as the Presbyterian church, USA. Last week we talked about what it means that one of the reasons we exist as a church is for the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God. This week I want to talk about what is maybe the most basic of the Great Ends of the Church, the one that might spring first to our minds if someone were to ask, “what is church for?” We are here, according to the Great Ends of the Church, “to maintain divine worship.”

Let me say, I discovered in tackling this topic that there is way too much to say about worship than can fit in one sermon. I could preach a six-week series just on worship; maybe I should at some point. I will barely have time to mention the scripture I just read, Jesus’ teaching about prayer and the Lord’s prayer, which is one of the two times Jesus gives us explicit instructions on how to worship.

Worship is so large a part of who we are, so central to our existence as a church, that you will have to take what I say this morning as similar to the blurb on the back of a really great book. I wrote the blurb, not the book.

We are here, we exist as an organization, in large part in order to worship God. And not just to do the actual worshipping—because we all know that could happen anywhere, right? You could come to the beach alone or go to the woods or sit on the couch and worship God--by praying, by singing, by contemplation, even by doing kindness, by loving your neighbor. Sit on the couch and Venmo Family Promise and boom, your worship is done for the day.

But our job as the church is to “*Maintain* divine worship.” To me that implies that we organize worship, we provide opportunities and places where it can more easily happen—in community. We provide the sanctuary; we frame the sacred space on the beach. We make sure there is music and prayer, and time for us to be together acknowledging, remembering, and praising God.

Our job is to make sure there is that time and space, set apart from the mundane, set apart from all that we do just to stay afloat in our own lives. It is a time out of

time. As Sabbath was meant to be a day when we stopped working long enough to appreciate what we work for and what it is to be alive--so the time of our worship together is a time when we stop plowing forward, long enough so that we can contemplate what it all means.

My oldest brother is fond of repeating something our dad used to say. When he talked about difficult times, Dad would say, “you just have to put one foot in front of the other.” Often that’s good advice, or just the reality of what we do. But worship is an hour in our week when we *stop* putting one foot in front of the other. We just stop, for an hour (or two if you come to Bible study), and maybe repair our spirits, maybe get the fuel we need to move forward when that hour is done.

So maintaining divine worship means that we organize opportunities for that to happen, we organize time for us to be together and remember God. For a lot of spiritual but not religious people out there, it’s the *organizing* part that gets on their nerves. You cannot put God on a schedule, runs this argument. You don’t have to go to church to worship God; you can worship God in your front yard or at your kitchen table. You absolutely can. But do you?

I think of Sunday worship as like a weekly date night for married people. Married people could get together any day, in theory. They could have substantial conversations and express their love for one another over breakfast or while they’re shopping at Walmart. They could, but do they? No doubt some couples do, and God bless them. But most couples benefit from a weekly reminder, to pay attention to the loved one, to pay attention to the relationship, to share what’s been going on with them, to remember their love for one another. We need that with God. A structure, a schedule that encourages attention to who God is and what our relationship to God is. I know it’s corny, but there’s a sense in which we can think of this as our weekly date night with our creator. You dress up, there’s candles, ambiance...☺

The other difference, of course, between church worship and “whenever” worship is that we do it together. We don’t all agree—on anything. There’s an old Jewish saying that whenever you have three Jews in a room you’re bound to have at least four differing opinions. I think that could just as easily be said of Presbyterians. We don’t agree; we don’t have to. We meet to worship together and to become one community, not because we are so very similar to one another, but because we are brought together by God, brought together by our common effort to follow Jesus.

And it is comforting to do worship together—there should be a good deal of comfort, along with a dash of challenge. When we know the words and the prayers, something that only comes with sustained worship attendance, by the way. You have to commit first, and then it gets more comfortable. When our conscious minds don't have to engage, we are comfortable enough to pray with our hearts, to commune with God and our neighbor in a nonverbal way. For me that's why the two most meaningful places in worship are the silence and the music. As the preacher, that is when my word-generating, word-dissecting mind takes a break, and, as the hymn says, my spirit finds "a new dimension in the world of sound, as worship moves us to a more profound alleluia."

When I was 16, I had the great privilege of going with a church group to Taize, the monastery and retreat in France. I remember going to an evening prayer service, where the monks led us in a seemingly endless chant, *adoramus te, Domine*. We adore you, Lord—over and over. I had been raised to despise rote of any kind, to abhor repetition, to believe that words should be used sparingly and accurately, for meaning, not just because they sound nice. What's more, I was 16 and I didn't particularly feel adoringly toward God. I was too smart for all that, at least in my own mind. But none of that mattered. The intonation of that simple tune, chant more than song--it was mesmerizing, it was unifying. Whoever these people were around me, whatever language they spoke at home, we worshiped together in those three Latin words, because the tune was so basic and the words so simple and the chant so repetitive that everyone could be fully engaged, speaking a phrase the real purpose of which was simply to orient us toward God, freeing up our minds and spirits to be together and to contemplate God.

When we say the Lord's prayer without actually thinking about what the words mean, it's ok. Because saying the Lord's prayer is more than what the words mean—although they are profound, elemental words. Saying the Lord's Prayer connects us with Christians around the world and across the millenia, all of us in need of daily bread, all of us inclined to sin, all of us living in hope of the coming kingdom of God. That connection is going to happen, no matter what you are thinking of when you say the prayer.

Kurt Vonnegut gave a sermon once—at least once--which is noteworthy because Kurt Vonnegut had little to no belief in God. But he preached anyway, and one of the things he said to the congregation was that the sermon and the worship service are not really about hearing the preacher's wise words. It's really a time set aside for us all to daydream about God. Thank you, he said at the end of his sermon, for your sweetly faked attention.

There is something very true in that. Everyone is not always paying attention to the words of the prayer or the meaning of the scripture, much less the sermon. But somewhere in it all, there will be some jumping off place, some moment that makes each person think, is that who God is? Or some musical phrase that makes us feel, God is good; these things are true. Or even a silence or a breath that makes us feel—oh yes, I almost forgot—I am alive.

The prophets tell us more than once that God hates our worship—when our worship is divorced from all concern for justice. When we are using this hour to sanctify our lives, when our coming to church, our being the church, becomes a badge, a get out of jail free card. When, no matter how we cut ethical corners or who we run over on the way home, coming to church proves to us that we are good people. When worship becomes 100% comfort and zero % challenge or re-orientation. When we meet here to say nice things about Jesus, things that have zero relevance for how we live our lives, then the Bible is pretty clear—God has no time for that crap. Our time out of time here is meant to keep us on the narrow path, when we leave here, when we are again putting one foot in front of the other.

Worship is what we do, together, to honor and to give thanks—we do it to acknowledge God's lordship in our lives. Acknowledge sounds too mild, as though we are only tipping our hat. But tipping our hat is a powerful thing. Here, we remember that there is something greater than ourselves, greater than the mortgage payment or the weather, and that God who is greater is the source and the ground of our whole existence. We could do this acknowledging all day every day, if we weren't forgetful and easily distracted, easily led astray. But since we are all those things, we do this acknowledging at regular intervals, at least we do it every Sunday. We do it for our own peace of mind, we do it to provide space for the person next to us to find peace of mind, we do it to remember that life is a gift, to be cherished accordingly, and we do it for the glory of God.