

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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Discipleship Series
Philippians 2:5-11

Worship: Who Is It For?

We're on our second go-round now on the marks of Christian discipleship, and it's my turn to address weekly worship as one of the six foundational commitments of those who want to follow Jesus. There's so much to say about worship, it's hard to know where to begin. So today I'll focus on one basic question for those who are committing or re-committing to discipleship—who is it for? And storyteller Bill Harley gave me a good starting place a couple of weeks ago on the radio.

Bill Harley became a household name for us about 9 years ago. He came to Bozeman for the Sweet Pea Festival, where he told stories and sang on the Family Stage. We all loved his sense of humor and his funny insights into the minds of kids and parents. We wore out his tapes on car trips.

So when on occasion I hear his voice on National Public Radio, my ears perk up. His most recent story was about being asked to sing the National Anthem at a minor league ball game.

He said yes without thinking about the implications. But as the day drew near, he started to get nervous. What if he started out on the wrong note? That could be deadly with "The Star Spangled Banner." He mentioned the singing engagement to a few friends, who responded with "You are? By yourself?" When the day came, he discovered it was "Bat Day," when all the kids in the audience would be given bats. He imagined himself the target of disappointed fans swinging bats if he did a bad job at singing. The moment arrived. He was escorted to the pitcher's mound. Thousands of people were in the stands, and they stood, and quieted down. He started to sing.

It was sounding pretty good. He got to "the rocket's red glare," and it was within range, and he began to really relax and feel good about being in front of all these adoring fans.

But then he noticed that they weren't looking at him. They were all turned towards the right foul pole. What could be there, stealing his "glorious moment?" He snuck a glance in that direction, and what do you think he saw?

The American flag.

And that's when he realized, that's when he learned one of life's lessons for the millionth time. It's not about me. It never is. ("Oh Say Can You See, It Ain't About Me," Oct 19, 2009)

Oh, that is such an important lesson, isn't it? Whether you are a stage performer or an athlete, a parent or a child, a teacher or a preacher, a CEO or a part-time janitor, an ordinary taxpayer or the President of the United States, it's not about you. The center of the universe lies elsewhere. That may in fact be a good definition of maturity—a deep understanding that life does not revolve around me!

Christian worship is a weekly reminder of that important life lesson. It's not about me. Oh yes, maybe I'd prefer to sleep in on Sunday mornings, but it's not about me. Maybe

I'd like to have my way of life affirmed, not challenged, but it's not about me. Maybe I'd like to get jazzed by an eye-opening, ear-popping performance, but it's not about me. Maybe I'd like to hear that what I believe is right, but it's not about me. True Christian worship is centered on our triune God. We worship because God deserves our worship.

The Old Testament teaches us this. The first of the Ten Commandments is to have no other gods take precedence over the true God. Wow, God knows human nature, doesn't he? We naturally put ourselves first, but it's not about me. When the prophet Isaiah had a mystical vision of God, he was humbled way beyond any other experience in life. "Woe is me," he cried as knelt before God's glory. It's not about me. And in the worship book of the people of God, the Psalms, there are outbursts of praise from start to finish, but the book concludes with five psalms which express a chorus of praise to God from all corners of the known and unknown world. From the highest heavens to the deepest oceans, all are called to worship our glorious, awesome God. As humans, we are naturally going to worship something or someone. It is a human trait to worship. The God of the Old Testament calls us to worship God alone.

But there is a delightful irony in this commandment, a paradox revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Lots of gods want to be worshiped; they want humans to bow down before them. Some in history have even asked for human sacrifices. But our God, the Lord of all creation, who deserves to be at the center of praise and glory, is a God of love and has a soft spot for the world. God loves the world. And this love is a self-emptying love, a love which pours itself out for the sake of those whom it loves. As Paul writes in the letter to the Philippians, Christ, who was in the form of God, gave up that form to take on the form of a human. He was rich, but for our sakes became poor. He lived in heaven but for our sake he came to live on earth. He was of God, in God, with God, but he became flesh. However you want to say it, what our language seeks to capture is the mystery of incarnation, that though he was in the form of God, Jesus (the child born in a manger, the carpenter of Nazareth, the teacher and healer and man of God) lived as a slave, a servant among us, demonstrating God's nature as one who gives everything up for love. Though he could have claimed the power and glory of God, he gave it up to be crucified. How low could he go? No lower than that. And because he did this, he deserves the blessing and honor and glory and power due to God alone. Therefore God has exalted him and commands us to do the same. The irony is this—the one who was great willingly chose to be lowly, saying with his life, "it's not about me." As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "You know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." (2 Cor 8:9) Because he did this for us, we now lift his name for all creation to praise. Our worship is all about Jesus Christ and his way of humble service.

When we learn and live this way of humble service, we experience a freedom and joy that cannot be found in living for ourselves. "It's not about me" is a gift. Isn't that a delicious paradox?

A commitment to weekly worship is one of the marks of Christian discipleship. Every one of the marks is good for us, and that's why God gave them to us. They take some work on our part, some self-discipline. We don't do them for the rewards, because it's not about us. But they do yield unexpected benefits. Weekly worship centered on God as we know God in Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit lifts up our sagging spirits, steers our directionless lives, nurtures our needy selves and places us closer to God's will. Weekly

worship with God as the focus gives strength for the day, and hope for tomorrow. Weekly worship is for God, because God deserves it and commands it, but it draws us nearer to the heart of God, and makes us more authentically the loving, righteous, good persons who God created us to be. There are abundant gifts in worship, even though it's not about me.

So how to keep the focus on God? I find helpful the image of worship drawn by the nineteenth-century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, comparing Christian worship to a drama in a theater. In the theater, the audience takes their seats, the actors come on stage, and the performance begins. Hidden from sight is the prompter who helps the actors with their lines. Worship is like this drama, Kierkegaard said.

But maybe not the way you might think it is. You might fall for the most obvious comparison in this metaphor: that the congregation is the audience and the minister and musicians are the actors on the stage. But if that's the case, where is God? Try this turnround. The preacher and other worship leaders are not the actors on stage but the prompters. And it is the congregation which is being prompted, having lines whispered to them so that they can act rightly, for the congregation comprises the actors. Now there is a place for God, who is the audience for the performance. Kierkegaard wrote, "In the most earnest sense, God is the critical theatergoer, who looks on to see how the lines are spoken and how they are listened to. The speaker is then the prompter, and the listener stands openly before God. The listener ... is the actor, who in all truth acts before God." (Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart*, pp. 180-81 (SV XI114-15); reprinted in *Parables of Kierkegaard*, Thomas C. Oden, ed., in http://www.reformedworship.org/magazine/article.cfm?article_id=837)

And once again, we learn, it's not about me. It never is. If you take away just one message about worship, make it this. Do you know? Can you say it? (IT'S NOT ABOUT ME!) If it's not about me, there's no room to be offended by the technology of worship, whether it's the old-fashioned technology of hymnals or the new-fangled technology of screens. If it's not about me, there's no excuse for refusing to learn a song that's new, or a new style, to you. If it's not about me, there's no cause for the scandal of "worship wars" which have sprung up in American churches in the last generation. Wrangling about how to worship gives no honor and glory to God.

What honors God is when we come to worship with open hearts, ready to listen, ready to obey God's word, and eager to live like Jesus. What gives glory to God is when our worship extends into the way we live our lives. Doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God are the acts of worship which the prophet Micah tells us God desires most of all. And isn't that a pretty good definition of having "the same mind that was in Christ Jesus," as Paul advised the Philippians?

Learning love, sharing faith, serving people, celebrating God—they seem to circle back around and intertwine with one another. Praise be to God for choosing us for this calling. Praise be to God for the gift of Jesus to show us how to do it. Praise be to God for life and eternal life. Praise be to God that it's not about me, or you, or us alone. Praise be to God that we're in this together, that Holy Spirit makes us one, and that we know who deserves all the praise. Praise be to God!

Now to the one who by the power at work in us is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever! Amen.