

As We End This Form of Worship...

*A sermon preached on Colossians 3.12-17 by Emily Hull McGee
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on July 22, 2018*

A few Sundays ago, my family enjoyed our Sunday lunch under the shade of our back porch. It happened to be one of those magical moments so rare these days, where it was a breezy 80 degrees in July, and three young children remained calm and happy over a pile of quesadillas and fruit and lemonade — at least for a bit! I don't know if the unexpected peace of the moment caught up with me, or if I was sitting in a different angle, or if they just had emerged in secret practically overnight, but I happened to notice for the first time a tangle of thick, springy, fuchsia blossoms of a crepe myrtle tree hanging low just behind my big fern planter. I was so taken with them that I got up to investigate, curious about the origin of these gorgeous flowers I had yet to see in the time we've lived here.

Upon a closer look, I realized that this tree had been planted years ago just behind the exterior walls of our family room. That particular spot of the backyard is a little more scraggly than the rest, because a nearby towering pine tree has nearly blocked any direct sunlight from reaching the crepe myrtle. About half of that crepe myrtle is covered by the shade of that solitary pine. That part of the tree is barren, its flowerless limbs fading into the nondescript landscape behind it. But wouldn't you know it, the tree had started to grow at an angle, the rest of its limbs veering sharply to the right to catch a little pocket of sunlight that filtered past that old pine tree. Warmed by the source of life and reaching towards it for sustained health,

those buds burst forth into blossom, and my porch was all the lovelier because of it!

I've thought about my tree a lot since then — time on the sand gives good space to ponder one's crepe myrtles! — and can't shake the richness of that image for us as we focus our shared attention on worship: what we do in worship, how we experience the prayers and songs and scripture, what worship means for our lives, why it matters. And I wonder: are we reaching for the shadows, or are we reaching for the Source?

So let's start with some of the questions many of us may have or have had at some point: what is 'worship' exactly? Who, or what, are we worshipping, and how are we to do so? Does worship have to take place with others in a sanctuary, or can it be done alone in the woods? Does it matter if one worships with an organ or guitars, screens or hymnals? Should prayers be spoken together or raised in silence? Is there a 'right' way to worship, and if so, are we worshipping correctly even this very moment? And if God is God, why does it matter if we worship or not? Does God need our worship? *Do we?*

As you might imagine, there are few 'answers' and a number of opinions to these questions we share. Millions of Christians all the world over have found endless expressions to worship God in Christ that arise from identity, tradition, conviction, and experience of God. For when worship of the triune God is what one scholar calls "the central most defining action of the gathered assembly and the ... action around which all other actions are

centered,” the theology of worship demands our careful reflection and intentional engagement.¹

The first source we use are, of course, the words of scripture, where throughout the psalms and books and letters and stories within, we hear centuries of people finding sacred ordinary ways to express their relationship to God. From ancient Israelites’ altar-building to the Lord to the Psalmist’s exhortation to “make a joyful noise to the Lord,” from Jesus’s instructions about prayer to the invitation of Colossians we heard earlier to “sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God,” our holy book is rich with expressions of human worship to the holy God. For that is *who* we worship. Bidden or unbidden, God is there. God is both audience and actor in worship, the subject and the object.² As one pastor says, “worship is how the people of God practice their reliance on their Lord.”³ By orienting our heart to God’s heart, we submit ourselves to be shaped by God in Christ through the rhythms of worship. We learn to love who God loves, to live how Jesus lives, and to move with the cadence of the Spirit in a world longing for redemption. Another scholar says, “Worship is the arena in which God recalibrates our hearts, reformed our desires, and rehabituates our loves. Worship isn’t just something we do; it is where God does something to us.”⁴

So *how* do we worship? Our church is one of millions around the world who share a familiar shape of our assembly. Each Sunday, brothers and

¹ Jane Rogers Vann, *Gathered Before God: Worship-Centered Church Renewal*, p6.

² Marva Dawn, as quoted by James K. A. Smith in *You Are What You Love*.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, p64.

⁴ James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love*, p77.

sisters in Christ gather before God, from all sorts of backgrounds, wearing all sorts of attire, using all sorts of instruments and languages and influences, in all manner of places – huts and houses, converted movie theaters and warehouses, plain pews in rustic buildings and majestic sanctuaries filled with stained glass. Regardless of the location or the look or the lives of those within, the rhythm of the assembly is simple yet timeless. The people gather – some in song, others in silence. Prayers and hymns center the assembly, inviting God to stir within the people that day. Amidst difference and sometimes even discord, we grasp hands and look into eyes as we share Christ’s peace with one another. Confession voiced together as the body of Christ offers space to name individual and communal sins against God and each other, submitting to the practice of naming times where our pride and greed and lust and idolatry disrupted God’s dream. Words of assurance remind all who gather that God’s grace is greater than all our sins, and through Christ, we are known and loved and forgiven. Prayers for the people give us space to intercede on behalf of individuals – the sick and the lonely, the diminished and the dying – and communities – the created world and all therein, leaders and those left behind, loved ones, neighbors, enemies and friends. Scriptures are opened, stories of Jesus are read, and good news is proclaimed. The sermon form of proclamation is never intended to be a summation of all the things – all that God says and does and is, all that the world demands with all that the preacher thinks, and then all that we are to believe and do. Rather, the aim is consistently to give each one of us an interpretation with which to wrestle, a word of God for the people of God to work within our hearts, tools to use throughout all we will experience in the

days to come. In each gathering, all have an invitation and an urging to respond – with our resources, with our energies, even with our very lives. Some weeks that response includes feasting together at the table on the gifts of God for the people of God; some weeks it means welcoming those whom Christ has beckoned into the waters of baptism. Our response includes a final proclamation of praise to God from whom all blessings flow. And every week as we go, we end this form of worship to begin again [say it with me] the worship that is our very lives...”⁵

And that is *why* worship matters. It matters to us as Christians, because we are seeking the heart of Christ, to shape our lives according to his. We desire to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience... to bear with one another, to forgive each other just as the Lord has forgiven us. The writer of Colossians is clear: “above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” Worship matters, because it becomes the place we learn to clothe ourselves in love as Christ did.

I’ve shared with you before from the terrific book *You Are What You Love* by James K. A. Smith.⁶ In it, Smith wonders if Christians have let Descartes’ model of “I think, therefore I am” become the lens through which we try and live a life of discipleship. In other words, we focus our attention on all that our minds can learn about God in Christ, poring over scripture to

⁵ Two summations of the shape of Christian worship were especially helpful to me this week: Gordon Lathrop’s *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* and Barbara Brown Taylor’s chapter called “Worship” from *The Preaching Life*. Both inform this paragraph of describing the shape of our worship.

⁶ Today’s sermon is deeply enriched by James K. A. Smith’s *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*. His framework and conclusions have helped me to articulate my own theology of worship and the Christian life, and I draw heavily upon his work in today’s sermon. I highly recommend it!

gain knowledge, attending conferences, listening to podcasts, and reading books that will illuminate some new facet of the Christian life. In so doing, we imagine that serious discipleship is a discipleship of the mind, and thus a true disciple is a learner, a student of Word and words, always reaching for more knowledge through which transformation would surely be made available.

And yet, as Smith wryly asks, “do you ever experience a gap between what you *know* and what you *do*?” You might *know* that donuts shouldn’t make up your daily diet, but when the Hot-n-Now sign is on as you drive to work each day, you may not *do* as you know! You may know that picking up your phone while you’re driving is unsafe, or that avoiding a hard conversation with your spouse is bound to come up later, or that spending once more the money you don’t have will catch up with you, but you may not do as you know! That’s when Smith would remind us that we’re more than just a sum total of things we know; rather, we humans are first and foremost lovers. We are driven by what we love, where that which we desire becomes like a magnet drawing us to itself, or, as Augustine says, “love is like gravity.”⁷ In this model, our hearts as engines for love become like a compass, pointing us and carrying us in the direction to which they are weighted.

But you and I both know that thinking our way past the Krispy Kreme in a weak moment of desire often is just not strong enough. We are informed by what we know, but it’s through the *habits* we practice that we are both reformed and transformed. Habits help things to become second nature to us. Thus, at its core, worship becomes the regular practice of habitualizing

⁷ As quoted by Smith.

ourselves, reforming our first natures towards fear or anxiety, anger or indifference, isolation or judgment into – ultimately – God’s way of Love.

You remember that crepe myrtle tree in my backyard, the barren limbs hidden in the shadow of a tree and the flourishing limbs stretching towards the sun? In much the same way, worship becomes our reach away from the shadows of other sources of our worship – those times we try and worship our money or our success, our power or our bodies – and instead our reach towards the Source of light, the God in whom we blossom and thrive. And just like the rising of the sun and the falling of the rain, so too do we enter into that life-giving rhythm with our Creator, trusting that in so doing, we become like the One we love.

Brothers and sisters, will we let our worship – our gathering, centering, proclaiming, responding, and sending – knit us the garments of love so that we too bear good fruit? Will we reach from the shadows towards the Source of life? For even as we end this form of worship, may it be so. Amen!