

... To Begin Again the Worship That Is Our Very Lives

*A sermon preached on Romans 12:1-2 and Micah 6:6-8 by Emily Hull McGee
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on July 29, 2018*

I.

Like many of you, I took piano lessons all throughout my growing up years. Every Tuesday during the school year, my mom would pick me up from school, and we'd come home for a bit to have a quick snack and unwind a little before leaving for my piano lesson. However my Tuesdays did not include unwinding because — without fail — I would hurry to practice my piano music one final time before my lesson that day. Now don't mistakenly assume that I was a diligent pianist who just couldn't take her fingers off the keyboard for a moment! Not even close. I don't know if it was a function of my personality or a habit I simply developed — perhaps a little of both — but as I grew into a teenager, I practiced less and less each day, opting simply to overload the night before and the day of my lesson with as much playing as I could. My downfall was that I was a decent sight-reader and could at least limp along with a piece of music I'd never seen if I absolutely had to.

As I look back on those days, I honestly don't know why I didn't practice more — making music brought me to life in ways that few things could. I relished the payoff of letting my fingers fly over the keys when I had mastered a piece of music. But that's just it right? The payoff, the performance, the emotional high, the culmination of all the work was thrilling and momentous, of course. But the payoff happened far less regularly than the daily grind of practicing, the plodding repetition of scales

and exercises alone on a piano bench were far less enchanting than a performance where all those pieces come together.

In those days, my dad once said to me words that haunt me still: “you know, you could be really good if you’d just practice!” And it’s taken me years and failures and embarrassments and mistakes since those days to realize that my natural inclination is to struggle to submit to the daily discipline of practice. I’m not just talking about the regular practice of the piano, but other things as well: the practice of writing about matters of faith when I’d rather just read, the practice of daily engagement with my health when I’d rather just splurge or sit on my couch, the practice of working tirelessly through a relational conflict when I’d rather just move on, the practice of meaningful, faithful, worshipful living when I’d rather just take the easy road. Choice after choice, moment by moment, it seems I’ve learned the hard way that, like cramming for a piano lesson, worshipful living cannot be squeezed in at the last minute or abandoned when the daily grind gets hard. Worshipful living must be a way of life.

II.

The stories of God and the stories of us revealed throughout scripture tell of a people reckoning with worship — how it is done, how it affects God, how it changes us. Two particular passages help us, I think, translate the gathered worship in community to the scattered worship of the everyday.

The first from the prophet Micah, where we hear of the unfolding relationship between the people of Israel and their God. In the verses that precede those Mitch read for us earlier, we hear the Lord speak to the people, reminding them of the salvation they have experienced time and time

again (from slavery, from injustice, from themselves) and wondering aloud how these beloved people could have forgotten their story. “Remember now!” the Lord implores. In response, an answer comes from Micah, speaking on behalf of Israel. “With what shall I come before the Lord?” The subtext here is clear: *God, what do you want from me?*

The possibilities Micah names root directly into the people’s weekly experiences of God in worship, where people come before the altar of the Lord in the Temple with sacrifices and burnt offerings, specific gifts that are intended to please God and cleanse, or atone for, the sins they had committed. And yet in Micah’s questioning mode, I almost hear a hint of desperation, like what often unfolds between two people whose disagreement is beginning to devolve into wild exaggeration, and one begins flinging all sorts of claims at the wall to see what will stick. The scale Micah uses here is grand, and hyperbole abounds: instead of talking about merely one ram – a routine offering in worship each week – he mentions thousands; not merely one anointing of oil, but ten thousand rivers; not merely an animal sacrifice, but that of my firstborn child. *What do you want from me, God?*, the prophet pleads on behalf of his people, *Is this enough?*

And like a parent speaking calmly to a petulant child, the Lord responds with patience and clarity: “remember! I’ve told you before what I find to be good. It’s not just what you can do one time, but rather a way of living you enact everyday. And it is simple: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with me. This is what I want! This is enough!”¹

¹ Helpful commentary from W. Sibley Towner and Carol J. Dempsey, “Micah 6:1-8,” *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1*, p290-295.

Micah's not the first to wonder if the gathered worship we offer God is enough to satisfy what God needs and what we need.

We remember Hosea, who spoke on behalf of the Lord and said: "for I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of god rather than burnt offerings."²

We remember Isaiah, who spoke on behalf of the Lord and said: "I have had enough of burnt offerings – they are futile. I cannot endure solemn assemblies anymore. My soul hates your appointed festivals they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them... *but learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.*"³

We remember Amos, who spoke on behalf of the Lord and said: "I hate, I despise your festivals... I take no delight in your solemn assemblies... I won't accept your sacrifices and offerings, nor will I listen to your music-making... *but let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*"⁴

Paul remembered these teachings as he wrote to the gathered community of followers in Rome. *The Message's* translation of these two verses from Romans are among my favorite: "So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for [God]. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without

² Hosea 6:6

³ Isaiah 1:10-17

⁴ Amos 5:21-24

even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out."

For Paul, the concept of a flesh-and-blood living sacrifice — not a one-time dead one — is directly tied to our ongoing worship of God. He knows that the worship of God is not a one-time activity, something you do and check off the list to move on to other things. Rather, Paul understands worship holistically — it becomes a posture of our bodies, our minds, our routines, our priorities, our resources, our very lives. And in so doing, Paul says, don't conform to the world — a world that normalizes checking in with God only when it's convenient or necessary, not adapting the rhythms of life to God every day — but be transformed, *transformed* by the renewed attention to God with your very life.⁵

In so doing, the promise of God revealed in these scriptures is this: if our worship is lived and dynamic, beginning with the gathered community and spilling throughout our days of doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God, then we will be transformed.

III.

As both Micah and Paul understood, moving from 'this form of worship to the worship that is our very lives' demands more than just offering our modern-day equivalent one ram or a thousand to God. It can't just come when simply turning the page in your day planner from Sunday to Monday. It doesn't just happen when we take off our Sunday best, returning our dress shoes to their spot in the closet or tucking our worship folder into Bible in the hopes we'll read them both more closely later. Worship is not something

⁵ Rochelle Stackhouse, "Romans 12:1-8," *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 3*, p. 374-378.

we complete or achieve, something we neatly wrap up and move on from. We cannot squeeze in or defer our worship as we might try to cram for a final exam or a piano lesson, or exchange a week's worth of healthy eating for a daylong fast before your weigh-in. Nor can we assume that an hour on Sunday is enough to rehabilitate or reform our hearts that are perpetually subjected to the relentlessly-fearful 24/7 news cycle, the envy-inducing scroll through other people's lives on social media, the powerful rivals for our affections in the shopping malls and workplaces of our landscape.⁶

Rather, **worship is a lifestyle, a way of life, filled with the regular discipline of submitting to the practices of discipleship** — reading scripture, praying for the afflicted, confessing what we have done and left undone, living in community, opening in hospitality and generosity, feasting on Love, baptizing ourselves into the water of Life, sharing and receiving God's grace, doing justice, loving kindness, walking humbly with God. And it's through a lifestyle change into the habitual, repeated rhythm of daily worship that we are not conformed but transformed, that we grow into the likeness of Christ.

Now you might find yourself nodding along and thinking that yes, this type of worshipful living sounds nice and even meaningful! But your worry is increasing as the minutes tick by, wondering what in the world it looks like when you step outside these walls to 'begin again the worship that is your very life.' You may be thinking, *how in the world would I have time or space to worship in the midst of everything else I have to do, everyone for whom I offer care, and every place that needs my attention?* Or like Micah, you wonder: *God, do you need all the things too?!*

⁶ James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love*, p27-55.

Perhaps for you, the rhythms of daily worship are most straightforward when you can start your day with God — awakening to God’s mercies new every morning as the sun rises, immersing yourself in Word and words, stilling your anxious mind with prayer. It could be as simple as waking up 15 minutes early to align your spirit with God’s before the day begins or as elaborate as shaping your morning devotion on the gathering-centering-proclaiming-responding-sending pattern of our communal worship.

Or maybe the rhythms of daily worship need to nestle into your homes, where you and others who live in your house share in the common practices together. That could start with what James K. A. Smith calls a ‘liturgical audit’ of your household, listening for the particular story that is told through your daily rhythms and tempos.⁷ If yours is a household whose activities move at a loud and frantic pace to match the world around you, perhaps practices of stillness and quiet may usher in a spirit of worship for you. That could mean getting ready in the morning without the Today Show humming in the background, or saying no to yet another commitment that would keep your family on the run so that you can find the unforced rhythms of grace instead. It could also look like a space in your house where you light a candle in prayer for a worldly need each day, or drape a cloth to invoke the liturgical season, or finding words of daily benediction for yourself or your family — a simple reminder to close the day that you are known and loved by God.

Maybe for you, the rhythms of daily worship need to spill into your workday, where the same warmth you experience in worship on Sunday carries into your board meeting on Tuesday. That might look like rereading

⁷ Smith, p128.

Jesus's call stories and discerning how they might apply to your life. For as prophet and proclaimer Marlon Hall once said:

*Worship is vocation becoming one with your belief. Jesus said to his disciples, 'You were once fishers of fish – that was your job. Now I will give you a different job. You will become fishers of people. You will use your skills as a fisherman to bring about a new way of engaging to reach the unreached and connect with the disconnected.' And also with you: 'You were once an accountant of numbers, but now I want to make you accountable to work that can transform men and women and people. You were once a teacher of children, but now you are a teacher of generations with divine possibility.'"*⁸

James K. A. Smith reminds us, “there is an ongoing dance between the rhythms of gathered worship and the rhythms of our ‘sent’ lives Monday through Saturday. Worship is not some escape from ‘the work week.’ To the contrary, our worship rituals train our hearts and aim our desires toward God and God’s kingdom so that, when we are sent from worship to take up our work, we do so with a habituated orientation toward the Lover of our souls.”⁹ You see, worshipful living doesn’t demand extra time or energy or resource beyond what we already are allotted. Rather, it asks us to use our lives differently. And in so doing, we are changed!

IV.

Joe Phelps, my former pastor and beloved mentor from whom I lovingly borrow my weekly benediction, used to say that what we do here on Sundays in gathered worship is like the huddle that football players come to between plays on the field. They gather together to gain clarity on what will soon unfold, getting direction from a coach, and determining what plays they will

⁸ Marlon Hall, <https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/worship-is-life>

⁹ JKAS, p187.

run. But then they go play the game! So too is our worship – we can't live our lives in the huddle, forgetting that the whole point is to prepare us for the game. Rather, we gather in this form of worship to prepare us, train us, orient us towards the worship that is our very lives.

In much the same way, Barbara Brown Taylor once told of her many adolescent years spent in ballet lessons. Like many other young girls, she loved all the trappings of ballet – the prickly tutu, the pink tights, the ribbons of the satin shoes – and often found herself drawn to the studio's mirrors to admire her fancy costume. Barbara's teacher wisely beckoned her away, teaching her instead how to bend and stretch, leap and move. Ballet was hard. It caused her muscles to ache and her brow to glisten. "But then one day I got to put [it] all together," she says, "bending and rising and sweeping the air like someone to whom gravity no longer applied. I got to dance."¹⁰

Sisters and brothers, may this form of worship be the gathering that huddles us for what we will soon face, the practice for the performance of our everyday life. May we end this form of worship to begin again the worship that is our very lives – to do justice, to love kindness, to walk humbly with God, to make worship the way of life we live. And through God's grace, may we find in the sacred ordinary, space to dance. Amen!

¹⁰ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, p75.