

“Of Wisdom and Worship”

Valley Presbyterian Church – August 19, 2018

13th Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 111

Rev. John Wahl

I Kings 3:1-14

The newest version of the *Book of Common Worship*, released earlier this year by our denomination, describes worship being “at the very heart of the church’s life,” and “all that the church is and does is rooted in its worship.”¹

Over the next few weeks, we will be looking at worship: when and where, what we do and how we do it; but today, we will be looking at the central question of why. Sharon Core, our still relatively new (1 ½ years) Presybtery Executive, often reminds us the importance of asking why – precisely because we so often simply repeat the way things have always been done. And so, while in the coming weeks, we will look at specifics about our worship tradition, content, and style – all of which are important – today we will look more closely at the foundation – the heart – of our worship life.

Today’s reading from I Kings describes a specific act of worship performed by Solomon, who had recently risen to become King of Israel following the death of his father, David. As no Temple had yet been constructed – something Solomon would soon begin to rectify – he goes to offer sacrifices to the Lord at Gibeon: one of the “high places” that had previously been a site for pagan worship.

While at Gibeon, God appears in a dream, offering to give to King Solomon anything he needs or desires. Instead of asking for things that would make his own life more comfortable, Solomon asks for the one thing that will bless the people he rules and therefore honor God. In doing so, he praises God for being faithful to his father David and describes himself as a “little child” (an exaggeration given that he is already married) as a way to express humility. He now has the task of leading many people – God’s people; a nation of God’s own choosing. Therefore, he asks God for an understanding mind (literally, a “listening heart”) in order to justly govern God’s people and “discern between good and evil.”²

¹ *Book of Common Worship*, preface.

² Kathryn Schifferdecker from *WorkingPreacher.com*

God grants this request and more: blessings abound for this new king, but the material blessings are secondary. Solomon speaks of himself as God's servant, and is not seeking his own personal gain, but the good of his people.

As I mentioned, while our translation describes the gift of wisdom as a discerning and understanding mind, in the ancient world this gift was thought to have been located in the heart. Since Solomon desires what is interior and profound rather than what is superficial, he is remembered even to this day as almost synonymous with the concept of "wisdom." Because his relationship with God – and his concern for God's people – was at the heart of who he was, God blesses him abundantly.

And yet, Solomon could not and did not come into this relationship without God's grace. At the beginning of our reading, we heard that Solomon, for political reasons, had married the daughter of the Egyptian Pharaoh – violating God's command against mixed marriage; and we also heard that he went to worship at Gibeon – a possible violation of God's warning about the worship of other gods. Therefore, Solomon comes to this encounter with God having sinned, and knowing that, going forward, it was the keeping or breaking of the covenant relationship with God that would determine his success or failure. Even though Solomon comes to God as a sinner, God in grace still comes to Solomon with gracious blessing.³

Even wisdom like Solomon – vital as it may be – is not by itself enough to save us. It takes more than wisdom to live a life pleasing to God. It takes God's grace, which is revealed to us in Jesus Christ. This is why we are invited and drawn to worship – because despite our best discernment and understanding, we also need God's grace. By ourselves, we are unable to encounter and make ourselves holy. That only happens through our relationship with God and with God's people.

And so, this brings us to today's conversation topic. I want to make space in the next few minutes for you to discuss – in pairs, but not more than three – the "why" of worship. To do so, I encourage you to share with one another a particular, personal experience of worship, or some ritual or habit that worship has taught you, that is particularly meaningful. Maybe it was an Easter sunrise or candlelight Christmas Eve service. Maybe it was a wedding or baptism of a child. Maybe it is a specific prayer or piece of music. Whatever it is for you, share that with your neighbor and try to express why it is particularly memorable and

³ Stan Mast from *Center for Preaching Excellence*

meaningful. After a few minutes, I will give you prompt to let your partner have a turn to speak, and then after a couple minutes more, I will bring us back together...

Worship is at the heart of what we do. It is not all of what we do – our fellowship, study, spiritual practices and service are also important – but they are rightly outgrowths and extensions that spring from the root of worship. Our love and relationship with God and God’s people is nourished and strengthened through the rituals, traditions, and innovations of our worship.

In his book *You Are What You Love*, James Smith says, “if you are what you love, and your ultimate loves are formed and aimed by your immersion in practices and cultural rituals, then such practices shape who you are.”⁴ Part of the “why” of worship, then, is because we are shaped by our participation in it, just as we might equally be shaped by practicing anything else that we love. Therefore, as I hope your conversations revealed, and as we’ll be discussing over the next few weeks, worship matters – all the particulars of what and how, where and when – and it all comes back to the why: because all the wisdom in the world is not enough; we also need God’s grace revealed to us in the person, teaching, and redemption of Christ.

Worship is at the heart of what we do; and it shapes the heart of who we are. Thanks be to God for this holy opportunity to give and receive, to gather and then be sent – all in the love, mercy and name of Christ. AMEN.

⁴ James Smith, *You Are What You Love*, p. 22