

The Pilgrimage of Worship – Mark 12:38-44 - Nov 11, 2012

Today I'm continuing my three-part series on worship with the second installment in the series. Last week we saw that all of the readings suggested in the Revised Common Lectionary were in some way relevant to the question, "Why Worship?" Today, however, it seems I can only use the gospel reading without bending a text too much in order to try to answer the question of the "what" of worship. I used the suggested psalm because the one that is the alternate we used last week, and I selected the reading from Ruth because it is one of those really earthy passages from the Old Testament that Christians today would blush and turn their eyes away if the translation had been truly accurate. If you want to know to what I'm referring then re-read the passage from Ruth – no, not right now, after the service! – and realize that when the text says "uncover his feet" that the Hebrew is most definitely not referring to the feet but another part of the human anatomy. When you do so, the full impact of Ruth getting pregnant will come clear – and she is by reputation the grandmother of King David!

Anyway, back to the reading from Mark's gospel. One of the things that strikes me in this passage is the promise of condemnation made by Jesus. Many Christians today and indeed many non-Christians are incorrect when they believe Jesus had a lot to say by way of condemnation. Nothing could be further from the truth. There are only three times in the gospels he is quoted as using this word, and one of those is a parallel in Luke's gospel of the incident here. The other time he uses the word is when Jesus declares he has not come into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved.

So, here in our reading we have a very rare promise from Jesus of condemnation. Who is the target of that unusual promise? Some anonymous sinner? Some scurrilous person who refuses to worship, or who turns their back on God? Well, in a sense, yes – but not who you would think of at first. Those for whom Jesus promised "the greater condemnation" were – wait for it - the crème-de-la-crème of the religious elite! They were the scribes, the learned and respected religious authorities who issued the religious writs, deeds, judgments and other legal documents of the day. Remember that the law, at least the civil law, was based upon the Levitical codes from the Hebrew scriptures. Criminal law was mainly Roman law, but the day-to-day stuff of contracts, deeds, forfeitures and foreclosures was under the scrutiny and control of the priests and scribes, although primarily the scribes.

Were the scribes promised condemnation merely because they were doing their jobs? No, it seems clear that Jesus had two major related complaints against them. His first complaint was against their striving to maximize the perks of their job – wealth, respect, "the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at the banquets." Perhaps this wasn't so much of a complaint as a characterization, a description of their human frailty, a frailty with which we can relate. The second part of what Jesus had to say about them shows us what moved him to predict condemnation – first, that they "devoured widows' houses," betraying the trust accorded to them to implement justice; and second, that they "prayed long prayers for the sake of appearances." Wow! What price appearances, if the cost is condemnation? It would seem to be a very expensive proposition pretending to be religious just to be called faithful – or is it pretending to be faithful just to be seen as being religious? Perhaps it doesn't matter which way around it is pretended, but instead the problem is the mistake of believing that appearances are important to God.

When I began this sermon I mentioned that this week we would be looking at the 'what' of worship, but it's awfully difficult to separate the 'what' from the 'why.' At least it was for those who were involved in the Reformation, beginning with Martin Luther and progressing through Karlstad, Zwingli, Calvin, and of course Knox. In their reactions to the worship practices that seemed to them to have fallen dangerously into the 'appearances' trap, those leaders went back to basic principles and in thinking about what worship should look like asked the essential question of 'why?'.

We looked at some of the answer or answers to that question last week, answers that included an acknowledgement of the greatness and goodness of God; a recognition of and response to the obligation to worship as our part of the covenant between God and humankind; and a joyful communal response to

the new covenant given through Christ Jesus. It was answers similar to these that helped the Reformers develop and outline an outline for worship that made sense, and our worship service here at Central follows that pattern. To give you just one example of that kind of ordering let's use an example I have seen, namely one congregation that took up the offering at the very beginning of the service. They are not alone, as many congregations used to do so before the sermon – it gave the counters not only an opportunity to get the counting done early but also to miss the sermon! As we go through the outline perhaps you'll come to see with me how contrary that placement of the offering is to Reformed theology.

I've talked before about worship being a pilgrimage, and I'll expand a bit more on that in a minute as we look at worship in the context of a life of faith, but even as we look at the organization of the worship service itself we can recognize a journey, or at least a movement. You can see the basic outline of that movement right in the bulletin: we approach God; we hear God's word; and we respond to God.

Before we get into more detail on the order that things happen in worship, we need to recognize the elements of worship – the things that we actually do. There are only a few basic components in Reformed worship: praying, singing, listening, and responding verbally. How then are these components arranged in a meaningful way so that we can, as a group in community, relate to God in a way which not only fulfils the 'why' but also leaves us feeling fulfilled?

The beginning of the worship journey or movement is the Approach to God. We recognize that we are imperfect people, that we do not always live out our lives in ways that are pleasing to God, and our approach to God reflects that. We approach God with appropriate reverence and awe, but also with great joy, singing of God's greatness and goodness as we come together like pilgrims assembling at a holy site. We also come confessing our sins and being reminded that we are forgiven in our faith, and sing a song of joy and acknowledgment in response.

At this point in our worship we acknowledge also the presence of children amongst us, and take a moment both to have them participate fully in the community of faith and to bring the word of God to them in a way that is relevant to their ages and experiences. This begins the central part of our worship which is, having set aside our sins by the grace of God, to hear what God has to say to us both in readings from scripture and in the word proclaimed in a sermon. The transition from scripture to sermon is made in song, almost always a hymn that acknowledges the three-fold nature of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, recognizing the role of the Spirit in helping us to hear and to live. Sadly not all preachers understand that a sermon is not about sin-bashing; neither is a sermon simply a reflection on current events and the value of humanity; instead, a sermon should identify the grace of God reflected in the scriptures and illustrate how that grace is still offered and enacted by God in today's world.

The congregation then responds to the word of God that they have heard. The responses are multiple, but there is an element of offering in all of them. Those with musical gifts offer sacred music as the congregation reflects upon the word. The congregation as a whole, led by one from among the congregation, offers both thanksgivings and petitions in prayer – thanks for the grace and mercy from God and petitions for help in various forms as we move forward. The assembled congregation also offers gifts in the form of money to fund and support the work of the church not only locally but throughout the world. (Note that this is the appropriate place for an offering, in response to recognizing what blessings God has showered upon us, instead of at the beginning where it looks like an admission fee!) This is also the time and place for the people to hear both thanks for what tasks and ministries have been done and what opportunities exist to participate in the life of the community of faith. The pilgrims then depart the holy place again singing joyfully and being sent upon their way with a blessing, to which all can respond 'Amen!'

So, can you see how the basic elements of worship – prayer, song, scripture, sermon, and offering – are ordered in such a way as to bring us forward joyfully to approach God, to help us hear what it is that God calls us to do and to be, and to guide us in our response to the grace and mercy that God continues to show us in the eternal covenant established through Jesus Christ?

But there's another aspect to worship that I think is important, and that is the role that worship plays in our lives. Just as we progress through the worship service as a journey – approaching God, hearing God, responding to God – so too we can see worship as part of a repeated pilgrimage in faith. When I speak of a pilgrimage I am referring to that ages-old practice of people making a trek or a journey to a holy site. We think of the pilgrimages made in ancient Israel, with the people singing what we now have as psalms as they ascended to the Temple in Jerusalem. We remember the pilgrimages of the faithful in the Middle Ages, journeys taking months if not years as people wended their ways from chapel to chapel to reach a holy site, perhaps Rome, possibly Jerusalem. Nowadays these annual pilgrimages are often done by both chartered jets and air-conditioned motor coaches.

What is common in all of these pilgrimages is the journey to a particular place to encounter the numismatic, the holy – to come face-to-face with God. In our faith we are bold to approach God secure in our faith in Christ Jesus and sustained by the life-giving Holy Spirit, but it is a journey just the same. We make our preparations, we leave home, we travel by various means and over differing distances to approach the holy site, the sanctuary of our church. We gather together with like-minded pilgrims, pausing to greet one another before we enter the holy place with respect and awe. We share together the experience of being uplifted by the Spirit as we worship God through our Lord Jesus. But then there's the part of pilgrimage that few talk about – the return home.

Pilgrims didn't – and don't – stay at the holy site. After the devotions, after experiencing the presence of God, the pilgrims pack up and head home – and the trip home is somehow different. Uplifted by the experience, the pilgrims return also changed by the experience, a change that is noticeable to those around them. The change is subtle but powerful, grounded in a security that cannot be shaken by the events of life. The change is reflected in the way the pilgrims relate not only to one another but to all people – exhibiting a measure of the grace that they have experienced in the pilgrimage.

This is also a phenomenon that we share in our weekly pilgrimage of worship. Not only do we encounter the holy in our worship service, we journey back home changed by the experience. Not as raving lunatics, but as people grounded by grace and displaying a measure of that grace to all others around us. There's a lot more I could say about this, but I'm out of time both for preparation and presentation of this sermon, so I guess I will have to continue next week. I hope and pray that you will join me on that journey as well.