

WHAT MAKES A CHURCH:
MARKETING OR DISCIPLEMAKING?
Acts 2:42-47

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I don't remember my first experience at worship. I was carried there as an infant in my mother's arms. I can almost count on one hand the number of weeks in my 59 years of life that I have not been somewhere in a worship service to praise and thank God. Worship is a part of my DNA. It's just deep within my soul.

It was the Westminster Catechism that stated years ago, the chief purpose of humanity is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. We were not created to please ourselves. We were made to please God. I don't know where that's more vividly expressed than when people gather in all sorts of places and circumstances to worship God and to celebrate God's goodness among us. Certainly that was true of the early Church. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. They were in awe and wonder at the multiple things that God was doing in their midst. They broke bread together and they added daily those who were being saved. What a beautiful picture of a church family in worship together. Worship is the heartbeat of a congregation and I'd like to talk about that today.

TO WORSHIP IS TO TAKE TIME

Day by day...they spent much time in the temple (Acts 2:46).

For the past 30 years the Gallop organization has reported that about 40-45% of American adults attend a worship service at least once a week in this country. More recently researchers have been questioning those figures. If 40% of Brentwood residents attended church today, would the churches have enough room to seat them? People may be lying about their church attendance like they lie about other things. In reality, the figure may be closer to 25% or 26% of Americans who show up at church on an average week to worship God.

Regardless of the statistics, the reality is this: you and I have to make worship a high priority in our lives. There is no question about it. Competition for our time is more fierce than ever before. I don't have to tell you that. You experience that; you had to decide that today. The argument for your time is intense.

There was a time in this country when Sundays were separated from the rest of the week by so-called "blue laws." Stores closed, work ceased, sports stopped, festivals ended for a day of worship and rest. I think one of my greatest mistakes in ministry was a public debate I entered with a pharmacist in a small Kentucky town over his decision to open his drug store on Sunday morning while I was trying to have church. It was a loser's game all the way around. I lost the debate. I lost a church member. The town gloated in the gossip. I learned a very painful, but true, lesson. Laws do not make good church-goers. We don't worship because of the law; we worship because of love for Jesus Christ. I know that continues to be a tough issue, especially for you parents who are here who have kids who are in soccer, football, dance and many other activities. It's more intense than ever before. You have to make some tough decisions about worship as a priority of your life.

A sports radio station announcer asked if anyone would be willing to give up sports for two years in exchange for two million dollars — no games, no radio, no TV, no sports page, no ESPN, no Tuesday morning discussions at the water fountain. One fan called in and said, "I wouldn't give up sports for 25 million dollars. It's the first thing I look for in the paper, go to on the Internet, and watch on TV. Sports surround everything I do. It's my life."

Americans might ask at what altar we really worship? Worship for many of us is spelled T I M E. In our action packed, hurry up, overly committed world you and I are challenged with more things to do than we will ever get done. Worship must become a priority. If we wait until it's

convenient we will never worship at all.

We made a commitment in this congregation about three years ago that worship was going to happen at multiple times and multiple places, not all on Sunday morning at 8:30 and 10:55. We are already at four worship services and we are going to five. Five years from now it may be ten. We are trying to make a commitment to you that there is a time and a place in the midst of seven days a week, 24 hours a day, where you have an opportunity to get beyond yourself and worship God. We will do everything on our part to make it available to you but you are going to have to make it a priority in your life. To worship is to take time. We have to decide where we will spend our time.

TO WORSHIP IS TO GET TOGETHER

All who believed were together and had all things in common (Acts 2:44).

The more we get together, together, together. The more we get together the more worshipful we'll be. Somebody here is surely saying, but I can worship God anywhere. I don't need to be with other people. Didn't Jesus instruct us to go into the closet to pray? Of course, you are right. When through the woods and forest glades I wander, I feel the need to worship God. Some people feel closer to God in a garden than anywhere else on earth. Martin Luther said a milk maid ought to be able to glorify God by milking cows. Brother Lawrence washed dishes in the monastery as an act of worship.

Certainly God can be worshipped anywhere. Yet, we are not called to be Lone Rangers. We are called to be a family of faith. Family implies connection, cooperation, conflict, consensus. We are called to be together in the family of faith.

Henri Nouwen wrote, "We are unified by our common weakness, common failures, common disappointments, common inconsistencies." The Church is not perfect, because people like you and me are members of it. That's why I say to those who like to point out the hypocrites in the Church — come on and join, you should feel right at home. The Church is not a museum for saints; the Church is a hospital for sinners. When we are weak and worn and broken and sinful, struggling to make it to tomorrow, we need to be at church more than any other time in our lives, where we find the presence and power of God.

The philosopher Schopenhauer once said the Church is like a group of porcupines trapped in an open field on a cold night trying to survive. The ground is frozen, the wind is fierce, and gradually the porcupines nudge closer together. That's when their sharp quills begin to pinch and hurt. Some draw apart and choose to sleep alone. They are the ones who freeze to death.

We belong in the fellowship of faith. We try to do that in many and multiple ways and it happens in lots of places in our lives. One of the things we've tried to do in the last few years is introduce a worship service designed for persons in their late 20's and it's going great. About 160 to 175 young adults gather every Monday night in the youth café and it's an all out worship service. Amy Saffell is one of those participants. I asked Amy if she would come talk with us for just a moment or two. "Amy, how long have you been attending the Loop here?"

Amy: I started coming here in July shortly after I moved to Nashville from being in school in Greenville, South Carolina, and living in Georgia all my life.

Dr. Olds: So you were new to Nashville this past July; you found your way to the Loop. Did someone invite you, did you find it on the web, how did you get here?

Amy: I came to church here and somebody in my Sunday school class told me about it and that's when I started coming.

Dr. Olds: Great! What have you found in terms of fellowship at the Loop on Monday nights?

Amy: When I first started coming everybody was so welcoming and so inviting. These people that

I found are my true friends. I feel like I have made some life-long friends. It has been a great experience because I came here not knowing very many people. Now I feel like I have tons of friends I can really count on.

Dr. Olds: How is it helping your spiritual life to grow?

Amy: It's really helping me because the message they present at the Loop really caters to those of us that are in our 20's, those of us that are really just beginning our careers and those of us trying to make it for the first time on our own. I feel like I really connect to that. I also feel like it has really increased my trust. When I came here, I really experienced a job search that was longer than I would have liked and really knowing that everybody else that I talked to that was my age was experiencing the same thing. It helped me to trust that God was going to take care of me because everybody else turned out okay. Just knowing that there are people there that will pray for me and that I can pray for others. It's been really great. I can always have someone to talk to about my spirituality, about what it means to be a Christian. It's just been a great experience.

Dr. Olds: Thank you, Amy, and welcome to Brentwood United Methodist. We are grateful that you are part of this community.

Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love, the fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above.

TO WORSHIP IS TO PRAISE GOD FOR HIS MIGHTY ACTS

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles (Acts 2:43).

What really enlivens a church is changed lives. It's not neat advertising, it's not marketing. The news gets out when God shows up and people's hearts and lives are transformed. Worship is not about gimmicks — one church, desperate for attendance, offered \$10,000 to the person who attended and sat in the lucky seat.

Worship is not about instruments — the psalmist said praise God with trumpets, harps, tambourines, cymbals, strings and flute. Worship is not about the activities that we have. Psalm 47:1 says, *Clap your hands all you nations, shout to God with cries of joy.* Psalm 150 says, *Praise God with dancing.* Sometimes in the middle of worship I want to say, "What would it take for the "Amen's" to sound from God's people again?" Church is not about any of that. Worship is not about tapestry. Worship is about transformation. Worship is not about performance. Worship is about praise to God.

In genuine worship God's presence is felt, pardon for our sins is experienced, hurts are healed, hope is restored. When heaven opens and hearts are touched, people are going to do all kinds of different things.

In worship the wonderful is revealed. When the awe of God fills a place, I get quiet, really quiet. I want to take off my shoes, fall on my knees. I want to hum softly, "His name is Wonderful, His name is Wonderful." I'm going to start saying under my breath, if not out loud, "Thank you Jesus, you've been a Rock in a weary land, a Shelter in the time of storm. You've been there when I needed you most. I looked for You in the shadows and I recognized You by the nail prints in your hands. You see, worship is coming into the presence of Almighty God. It is being ushered into the presence of the Holy Spirit and having our hearts strangely warmed and transformed. Let me tell you, my friends, when that happens you won't have to advertise it. People will know. Worship is to be caught in the awe of God's presence.

TO WORSHIP IS TO BE DEVOTED

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer (Acts 2:42).

One of the great privileges of being able to work in the church is that you work with some of the finest people on earth. My have friends tell me "You don't really know what the world is like. You

work with church people all the time. You work with the best of society.” I have to say they are absolutely right. When I talk about devotion I know I am talking about something that many of you know. I want you to meet Tyler Knox today. Tyler is a sophomore in high school. These seniors are all graduating today. Tyler has been a part of Sonshine Choir for the past year.

Dr. Olds: Were you in Jubilation Choir before that, Tyler?

Tyler: All three years.

Dr. Olds: All three years and now three more years to go in Sonshine Choir. Let me ask you a question I’ve often wondered. What motivates you to get out of bed every Sunday morning and get to church by not later than 8:00 a.m. so that you can warm up and be ready to march down this aisle at 8:30 not one Sunday a year or two Sundays a year but 52 Sundays a year? What makes you do that?

Tyler: Well, every Sunday night we practice songs, they are upbeat songs and I just like to come on Sunday morning to show the congregation what we have been practicing for the past couple of weeks. I just like to come and hang out with friends and share God’s word.

Dr. Olds: That’s a devotion that you do, it really is. I was talking with somebody yesterday who sang in Sonshine Choir ten years ago; she’s getting married now. She said, “You know, I still put the CD in of the last year I was in Sonshine Choir.” I said to her, “You don’t remember any sermons you heard during that period of time but you remember every song that the Sonshine Choir sang.” Isn’t that true? It’s in your heart, isn’t it?

Tyler: Yes

Dr. Olds: I just want to say thank you and thank you to all of you for your devotion. You are an example of devotion to the Lord. You help us worship week after week. Thank you Tyler, God bless you.

Let me ask you a question. Are you devoted to the Lord? On this Memorial Day weekend when we have people in foreign countries giving their lives for this country, are you devoted to be in church to pray for them? Where is worship on your priority list?

Let me tell you a very personal story. When our son Wes was five years old, he came home from Sunday school and announced that he never planned to go to church again. Being the son of a pastor, I could see a problem brewing, so we sat down to have a talk about it. “Tell me, why do you dislike Sunday school so much? Is it the teacher, is it the lesson, is someone picking on you? Is it too early in the morning?” “No,” he replied, “it’s none of these. It’s just that I’ve been the only student for the last five weeks and I don’t like being in class by myself.”

That day I was angry with the parents of every five-year-old in that church. We not only have a responsibility for ourselves, we have a responsibility for others. Are my actions and attitudes about church helping or hindering someone’s relationship with God? In your heart, give a truthful answer.

Some of the most devoted people I’ve known, I have met in church. How can I be so lucky to work with such wonderful people? Worship is the heartbeat of a church. I want to bow here and renew my covenant with God to be the very best pastor I can be. Maybe you would like to join me in a similar act of devotion. Maybe you can use your spiritual gifts and share your God-given talents to make worship more meaningful in this congregation. Let us take a moment of private commitment to the Lord.

