

What Is a Worshipper?

Acts 2:42-47, Psalm 148

The question in the title of today's message -- "What Is a Worshipper?" -- presumes a prior question: "What is the meaning of worship?"

The Merriam Webster 11th Collegiate Dictionary defines worship this way: "to regard with great or extravagant respect, honour, or devotion." *The Compact Oxford Dictionary* says worship is "the feeling or expression of reverence and adoration for a deity."

The way we use the word "worship" today, however, does not necessarily have to include God. We talk about hero-worship, don't we? The heroes people regard today with extravagant devotion come in the form of sports figures, singers, actors and writers for instance. We humans have this incredible tendency to pay great devotion to whomever or whatever we admire greatly. There have been a lot of red carpets in town the past 10 days for the many actors and directors and other famous persons in Toronto for the international film festival. If Queen Elizabeth were here, she too would have her red carpet.

Sometimes great devotion, even touching on worship, includes money. You and I know money is important for our lives so, in itself, money isn't the issue. In fact, the use of money is fundamental to society's functioning. But Jesus knew something about human nature when he said in Matthew 6 that **we can't love both God and money at the same time**. He implied that some people, in practice, give acquiring wealth the time, attention and devotion that God should have in their lives. If we love wealth like that, that love is called worship. But it is impossible to worship both God and money at the same time. And human experience tells us how true that is. At our deepest level, we were created for worship but that instinct has been bent all out of shape.

Worshipping God is not an optional extra for a Christian. Worship is not a self-indulgent religious activity we choose to do now and then on our terms. Worship is the basic response a Christian gives to God. "Worship" comes from an Old English word meaning "worth-ship." When we worship God, we are doing two things: we are recognizing what God is worth – God's awesome greatness -- and then we are giving God all our devotion for all God is worth. When I wrote this statement down, my response in the margin was: "Incredible! – is this even possible?" Can we even come close in giving God all God is worth?

Job – who knew great suffering – said of God, "I have treasured the words of [God's] mouth more than my daily bread" (Job 23:12 *TNI*). Think about that. When I treasure something, I look at it with great admiration – maybe even with love and longing. I pay careful attention to it and protect it. I think about it and look at it often. I talk to my friends about its worth to me.

Worship is like that. Worship is treasuring God. **We ponder God's worth both in himself and to us and then we do something about it -- we give God the great devotion God deserves for all his great and awesome worth.**

So we ask this morning, what do we mean when we call ourselves worshippers of God? There are no doubt a variety of answers but, for followers of Jesus, here is one way to reflect on the answer. We can call a worshipper someone who practises the ABCs of worship:

A stands for Acknowledging God's worth.

B stands for Believing God is personal and God reveals himself to human beings.

C stands for Choosing to respond to God who is worthy of our devotion.

Acknowledging the worth of God. God is worth pondering deeply and treasuring highly. I often wonder, in our busyness and with our fascination and love of other things, how often do we ponder the things of God? Do we really treasure God? Are we really in awe of God's greatness?

Contemporary songwriter Bart Millard of the group Mercy Me catches a glimpse of God's awesome greatness in his song "I Can Only Imagine." He wrote it as he pondered his father's death.

I can only imagine
what it will be like
when I walk
by Your side.

Will I stand in Your presence
or to my knees will I fall?
Will I sing Hallelujah?
Will I be able to speak at all?
I can only imagine.

I can only imagine
what my eyes will see
when Your face
is before me.
I can only imagine.

I can only imagine
when that day comes
and I find myself
standing in the Son.

Surrounded by Your glory,
what will my heart feel?
Will I dance for You, Jesus,
or in awe of you be still?

I can only imagine
when all I will do
is forever
forever worship You.
I can only imagine.

It is one thing to worship and praise God when good things are happening. But even when we experience great sadness and difficulty, we can still worship God. Earlier, I quoted Job -- a man who suffered much. He lost his livestock. All his houses and barns were destroyed in a great storm. His children were all killed. He experienced pain and suffering in his body. And, yet, Job stuck it out with God. He was someone who worshipped God "with his wounds." Strange, perhaps, but nonetheless true!

Michael Card is another Christian songwriter, singer and leader of worship. He wrote a song called "Come Lift Up Your Sorrows" containing the line "Worship God with your wounds." When asked about this line, Card responded:

"We can't worship God without recognizing our woundedness. We have a worship revolution going on ... but we're not worshiping. There is no woundedness in it. True worship celebrates God's worth, and without experiencing woundedness, you don't know [God's] worth."

Both Job and Jesus understand that comment. Job never let go of God. (Even when his wife wanted him to curse God and die because then he wouldn't have to suffer anymore.) Jesus understood because, as the Scripture reveals, "He was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities" (Isaiah 53).

When life is good or when life is difficult, we can continue to worship God and **acknowledge that God is worth our praise and devotion.**

In our ABCs of worship, **B means Believing God is remarkably personal and revealing.** We say that **God is personal** because God became very personal in Jesus Christ. I like *The Message Bible's*

paraphrase of John 1:14: “The Word – meaning Jesus -- became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.” In other words, God revealed himself in a remarkable way by becoming human. Another Scripture (Philippians 2:7-8) tells us Jesus “set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, [he] became *human!*” God chose to become one of us through Jesus Christ. That is remarkably personal and human! To live among us, to walk with us and, ultimately, to die for us – all of this is intensely personal and human. Jesus Christ is truly amazing!

Worship, then, is acknowledging that not only is God personal and worthy of our worship, God is also a Revealer. Through Jesus, God brings light into darkness. Through Jesus, God speaks hope. Through Jesus, God acts in love. Through Jesus, God acts with justice. You see, the God we worship is **a God of revelation**. One important way to read the Bible is to see from beginning to end – from the first book of Genesis to the last book of The Revelation – that God is calling us to know the stories of God’s love and God’s desire for the good of all that he has created, for every one of his human creatures. The Bible is a book that reveals God is personally involved in the real lives of real people.

I often read what someone writes about a particular book. People praise the book on its back cover but critics also abound in the world of literature. This week I came across the following observation that caused me to rethink how I let another’s critical opinion influence my own evaluation of a book or piece of literature:

"If you want to know an author's heart about the book you'd like to read, just ask him yourself. Take all other reviews with a grain of salt and decide for yourself."

If I apply this thought to reading the Bible, then I ask God to reveal his own heart about the Bible through the Holy Spirit. How does God regard the Earth and the universe he created? How does God regard the human heart and spirit? When I take the time to ask God, then study what God says and listen to God, I can trust that God, who is love and who acts in justice, will let me know his heart for humanity and for the Earth. And I have discovered I worship a God who reveals a heartbeat of compassionate love for all humanity.

In our ABCs of worship, the letter **C stands for Choosing to respond to God who is worthy of our devotion and who reveals himself to human beings in Jesus Christ.**

We are going to be looking at the book of The Acts of the Apostles in the Wednesday morning Bible study group as well as in the Sunday morning messages. I like how one writer sets us up to look at Jesus’ disciples in the Book of Acts. Max Lucado writes:

They aren’t the same men.

Oh, I know they look like it. They have the same names. The same faces. The same mannerisms. They look the same. But they aren’t. On the surface they appear no different. Peter is still brazen. Nathanael is still reflective. Philip is still calculating.

They look the same. But they aren’t. They aren’t the same men you read about in the four [Gospels]...they’re different.

You’ll see it. As you read [through Acts] you’ll see it. In their eyes. You hear it in their voices. You feel it in their passion. These men have changed.

As you read you’ll wonder -- are these the same guys? The ones who doubted in Galilee? The ones who argued in Capernaum? The ones who ran for their lives in Gethsemane? You’ll wonder, “Are these the same men?”

The answer is no. They are different. They have stood face to face with God. They have sat at the feet of the resurrected [Jesus]. They are different.

Within them dwells a fire not found on earth. Christ has taught them. The Father has forgiven them. The Spirit indwells them. They are not the same.

And because they are different, so is the world.

The apostles saw the risen Jesus and were never the same again. Others who listened to them speak and who were open to God's Spirit responded by believing what they heard from these eyewitnesses about Jesus being resurrected. And then they too experienced God's remarkable presence personally – they sensed God's love in forgiving their sins. They experienced God's strength as they spoke with courage to others about Jesus. They learned about God's heart of love and shared with each other and cared for those in need in their community.

What is a worshipper? Someone who acknowledges God is worthy of our devotion. Someone who believes God is personal and reveals light and hope and love and justice and goodness through the resurrected Jesus Christ. Someone who chooses to respond personally to this great and personal God.

But we human beings worship God because God has graciously acted toward us *first*. One Scripture says we love because God first loved us (1 John 4:19). God wants us to worship him. God loves us so much there is no length God will not go, no road God will not go down to reveal his heart of love for us – and for all humanity. When Adam sinned in the garden, Adam did not cry out, "God, where are You?" It was God who called out, "Adam, where are you?"

Worship is our human response to a great and gracious God who reaches out to us through the resurrected Jesus to love us and to bring us into God's Kingdom. We love God in return through our worship and in the ways that we care for each other and for those in need in our world.

Our creed is an expression of faith and worship. Let's say it together once more:

We are not alone,
we live in God's world.
We believe in God:
who has created and is creating,
who has come in Jesus,
the Word made flesh,
to reconcile and make new,
who works in us and others
by the Spirit.
We trust in God.
We are called to be the Church:

to celebrate God's presence,
to live with respect in Creation,
to love and serve others,
to seek justice and resist evil,
to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,
our judge and our hope.
In life, in death, in life beyond death,
God is with us.
We are not alone.
Thanks be to God.

May this be so for me and for you.

Rev. Chris Miller
September 20, 2009