

Acting Out sermon series
#1 – Why We Worship
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Have you ever thought how strange this Sunday morning gathering must seem to people outside the church? It must look pretty absurd. First, why would we voluntarily get up early on a weekend for this? It just defies logical explanation. When I was graduating seminary, I prayed to God and told God to send me to whatever church God wanted, just make sure they don't have an early service. Spoiler alert: they did, at 8 a.m. When I was preparing to leave that church, I told God, "OK, you messed up that first time but I forgive you. Let's not let that happen again." At least Crestwood's first service isn't until 8:30 a.m.

Getting up early is not the only part that's peculiar. When else do we gather with a group of people this size on a weekly basis? We'll gather with bigger crowds for things like sporting events and smaller groups for dinners and parties. The only time I can think of that we gather like this is for a movie, and at least there we get popcorn.

Not only do we gather, but we sing. Out loud. Sometimes even on-key. What is this, Holy Karaoke? Where else would we do that? We also listen while someone reads from a book and then talks...and talks...and talks. Nothing explodes, no aliens or monsters appear. In this visual age driven by soundbytes and computer graphics, just sitting and listening to someone talk must seem at best antiquated and at worst a waste of time. Stop nodding so vigorously!

If that behavior is not strange enough, in the shadow of an instrument of execution we share something we call a "supper," but it's not even an appetizer. We say some words about it being someone's body and blood and then we eat it. Yuck! And to top it all off, we don't have to pay admission but some of us even give away our money while we're here. Are we completely out of our minds?

Possibly. It depends on how we understand this phenomenon we call worship and why we choose to participate in it on a regular basis. I want to spend some time exploring the elements of our worship time together: the words we use, the songs we sing and the communion we share. But today I want us to talk about why we are here. You could be a lot of other places doing a lot of other things right now. Why do we worship?

There's one thing we know for sure about Sunday. Every seven days, it's going to happen. I checked the almanac, and we haven't skipped a Sunday yet. You may feel like the guy who woke up on Sunday morning and told his wife he didn't feel like going to church. She told him they were going but he kept resisting until finally she said, "Kory, you're the preacher, you HAVE to go!" Totally fictional story, by the way. Sunday is a constant presence in our week. Not only can we not prevent it, we rely upon its consistency by marking it with worship. Laurence Stookey, in his book "Calendar," says that Sunday worship "is not simply an old habit the institutional church has not yet managed to shake. Rather it is an affirmation of the continuing and dependable presence and activity of God in creation." Sunday, worship, and God's presence with us are all continuing and dependable. And in turn, we are called to be dependable in our worship.

But the reasons why we come here are quite varied. I've asked a lot of people why they go to worship, and have gotten a spectrum of answers: to renew ourselves, to take time to be with God, for the fellowship, because we are free to do so, even because it is seen as an obligation or

routine. While all of these answers have their value, if I understand worship correctly they are not the reason we are here.

We worship for one reason: to praise God. We don't come to church on Sunday mornings to hear a sermon or sing a song or see our friends or take communion. We come to praise God. Now the good thing is that all those other things help us to accomplish that goal. When we listen to a sermon, sing a song, fellowship with others, or take communion, we are in fact engaging in acts of praise. We praise God through our words and actions, through our relationships, through our presence. Faithfully coming to church each Sunday is itself an act of praise.

The word "act" is important here. Worship is meant to be active. The word "liturgy," which is the order of a worship service, literally means "the work of the people." The psalms tell us to sing, to dance, to shout our praise. In worship, the congregation is not the audience. God is the audience and we are all the actors. Worship is something we do, which is why we make it participatory. We sign, we speak the call to worship, we give, we take communion. Worship is best used as a verb, not a noun. There's a difference between going to worship and worshipping.

Because it's an act, worship is not a time of rest. It's not a time to kick back and chill out. Worship should not move us back into our seats until we are comfortable; it should move us forward in our seats until we are on the edge, anticipating the next word God will speak to us. We should leave a worship service energized, not from being rested but from being inspired, from being enlightened by God's word and nourished at God's table, from simply being in God's presence. Through the study of the scripture, the soul-stirring singing, the symbolism of the sacrament, we are acting out our praise to God.

This approach flies in the face of our service-based culture that is focused on meeting needs. We go to places like the grocery store, the movie theater, and the restaurant to have our needs met, so we often times bring that same mindset to church. As we approach the sanctuary, we come subconsciously thinking our spiritual needs will be met in worship. This past week I was able to worship four times at our General Assembly in Louisville. The worship services were amazing and Spirit-filled, but I didn't like all the songs they sang. I didn't agree with everything the preacher said. Some of the prayers were too long. One service went for 2 hours 45 minutes. So no complaints when we're 10 minutes over, OK? I didn't understand when a leader spoke in Spanish or Korean. But it's not about me. It's not about you. It's about God. The song you don't care for may be speaking directly to another person's soul, helping them experience God in a powerful way. We are not called to worship expecting to get something; we should come to worship expecting to give something – our voices, our hearts, our time and our attention. All of these become gifts we lay at God's feet when we come into worship as offerings of praise.

Another challenge to worshipping is how divided our attention is these days. In our saturated society we are all conditioned to be multi-taskers, so it's very difficult to come into worship and fully center ourselves in this experience. Psalm 95 says, "Come let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our maker." That is an act of genuflecting, of supplication, of laying ourselves at the foot of God's throne. It's a time each week, maybe the only time each week, where we say, "My life is not my own. I'm not in control. I don't always know what's best. God, your will be done." Eugene Peterson says, "Worship is the strategy by which we interrupt our preoccupation with ourselves and attend to the presence of God. If we don't attend to God regularly in worship, we have no chance of attending to God at all at other times and in other places."

And yet, distractions abound. I've always thought it would be a good rule if we left our cell phones at home on Sunday morning. We don't need any help being distracted in worship.

But what if we also left behind our mental to-do lists, our weekly planners, our lunch plans? What if we came into worship with no preoccupations, 100 percent ready to give God our full attention? After all, we're about to come into a place that is unlike any other place. This is holy ground. The cross is not for hanging laundry to dry; the communion table is not for playing poker. Maybe, before we enter the threshold of this sacred room, we could stop and say a small prayer, asking God to help us clear our minds and hearts of the things that keep us from focusing. Then, we are ready to praise God.

The attitude we bring to worship often determines what we get out of worship. If we come on Sunday feeling worship is an obligation, we will sing and pray and worship like it's an obligation. If we come looking for an escape from our hectic lives or for a social gathering, we'll leave feeling that's what we got. What are you expecting to happen when you come to worship on Sunday? If we come with worshipful hearts, ready to praise God, that's what will happen.

Such focused attention helps us cultivate a worshipful attitude, which is marked by an openness to God's presence and the way the Spirit works through worship. Openness to worship requires being willing to work together to make worship both a sacred and dynamic experience. It must connect us to the rich traditions of the church but it also calls us forward into the future. A willingness to try new things, to take risks, is necessary for worship to remain vibrant and relevant. As professor Charles Rice says, we can't become so busy dusting the plastic flowers that we stop cultivating roses. Our central purpose of worship and anything we do during the service, new or old, familiar or foreign, must have as its ultimate goal the praise and adoration of our God. That's the criteria by which to judge every element of worship. How would worship be different for us if we didn't just go through the motions, but saw each act as a way of building our relationship with God?

Why do we do this each and every Sunday? We don't do it because God needs it. We don't worship an insecure deity. We worship because we need to do it, to be reminded on a regular basis of our dependence on God and our call to give God thanks and praise. We say "yes" to worshipping God as a way of saying "no" to worshipping anything or anyone else. We worship God because God is infinitely worthy to be worshipped. God is the Lord of our lives and we come here to say it with emphasis, with passion, with faithfulness. Come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord God, our maker.