

Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations

Passionate Worship

Frankton - 7/13/14

Scripture: Psalm 84 Worship God

Proposition: Passionate Worship shows our love for God.

I need to have the ushers come forward and help me for a minute. We are in a series of sermons based on the Bishop Robert Schnase's book *Five Principles of Fruitful Congregations*. To remind you that we are to be fruitful, every week we're going to give you a different fruit. Today happens to be extra special. Today's fruit is pomegranates, but there's something special about them. They are chocolate covered pomegranates. Today we're going to talk about passionate worship and to be passionate requires energy. Obviously, chocolate has sugar in it and that gives us a spike of energy. So everyone gets a chocolate covered pomegranates You don't have to wait, once you get yours. You can mow down on them or you can wait and savor them at your leisure.

In his book, Schnase outlines five specific areas that he has seen be effective in growing congregations. He believes these five practices to be imperative for a church to perform in order to it to be successful in its mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ. These five practices are what this sermon series details: Radical Hospitality, Intentional Faith Development, Passionate Worship, Risk-Taking Mission and Service, and Extravagant Generosity. Last week we talked about Radical Hospitality and how churches that practice Radical Hospitality go above and beyond what is expected because the church folks love those who do not have a relationship with Christ, so they go out of their way to show them Christ. For Intentional Faith Development, Christians understand that in order for them to have a deep relationship with Christ, they must work on that relationship through Bible study, prayer, small group participation, etc. This week we're going to tackle Passionate Worship.

Vibrant, fruitful, growing congregations offer Passionate Worship that connects people both to God and also to one another. We gather consciously as the body of Christ expecting to experience the three-in-one Godhead. Worship is the time where we gather deliberately seeking to encounter Christ through singing, prayer, scripture, and Holy Communion. And then we respond by allowing God's spirit to shape our lives and therefore our community. We come expecting to worship; we don't come to play worship - at least we shouldn't. We should come expecting God to change our lives through worship. And our own lives, once shaped by God's spirit, become the nucleus for congregations with extraordinary warmth, graciousness and a sense of belonging. People are truly searching for worship that is authentic, creative, alive and comprehensible, where they experience the life-changing presence of God in the presence of others.

For us to truly understand worship requires our looking beyond what we people do in our worship of God to see with our eyes of faith what God does in worship for us. God uses worship to bind people to one another in the bond of Christian love. God uses worship to heal wounded souls from the stuff of life that keeps us from seeing the purpose of life. God uses worship to inspire compassion for our fellow humans who society treats as the least, the last, the lost, the lonely and the left-out. God uses worship to provoke change in our individual lives so we can change the lives of others in God's world. God uses worship to renew hope to those in the world who if they can see tomorrow at all can't see a better tomorrow for themselves. God uses worship to shape

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decisions of those who are confused or unsure of what path to take. And finally God uses worship to transform lives from that of sin sick souls to healed saints still in need of love. Through Christ, God actively seeks to be in relationship with us through worship.

From the earliest accounts of faith, people gathered to pray, sing, listen for God's Word, and share in the common meal. The word "synagogue" means "to bring together," and the Greek word for church, "ekklesia" means to be "called out of the world." It refers to calling people from their ordinary life to gather together in sacred time and space. Worship breathes life into the community of Christ's followers. Through worship, God pardons sins, restores relationships, and changes lives. Jesus tells the story of the tax collector genuinely and humbly crying to God in the Temple, and says: *I tell you, this sinner...returned home justified before God.* [LK 18.14] and it doesn't matter if the worship is done in an old sanctuary, a new building or outside under God's brilliant blue sky.

Worship was the reason given repeatedly for why God liberated the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. Exodus 8.1 has God through Moses telling Pharaoh to: *let my people go, so they can worship me.* Worship defines God's people. In worship, people practice the highest command Jesus has taught us: *And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.' The second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' No other commandment is greater than these.* [MK 12.30-31] Worship helps to bend our hearts toward God even as it helps to stretch our hands toward others.

Worship is the most likely setting for people to experience the renewed relationship with God that Christians call "justification." Justification is that state of grace where we are pardoned, forgiven, loved and accepted by God and worship is the most likely setting to experience that. John Wesley, the founder of what is now United Methodism, repeatedly reminded early Methodists of how the 'new birth' is God's gift-like work in Christ that is received and accepted when people open their hearts and arms to God. Worship is the church's optimum environment for conversion to Christ whether it is quick and dramatic or it's marked by a gradual shaping and nuanced change over a period of time. God expects lives to change in worship, why shouldn't we? To put all that in some other words, the most evangelical hour of the week is the hour where God's family gathers in worship.

A small rural church with a limited budget had a distracting microphone problem. The pastor's voice would fade in and out, and an annoying popping sound disrupted the sermons, prayers, and songs. The Trustees said they didn't have any money to fix the sound system or to upgrade it. One member, frustrated by the fact that the most important gathering time in the life of the congregation was constantly being sabotaged and undermined, felt called by God to take personal responsibility to do something. He felt so passionate about worship and believed it was so important to fix the problem that he offered to pay the entire cost himself. Through the frustration of a bad microphone, he heard God calling him to do something so others could hear better and so enhance worship for everyone.

If worship includes all that I have stated so far, why use the word "passionate" to describe the practice of vibrant, fruitful, growing congregation? Doesn't that seem redundant? Not really, the problem is that you can do all of the things I've talked about and just do them perfunctorily, automatically, unthinkingly, in other words, without passion. Results are not the same. Worship without passion become dry, routine, boring and predictable. It keeps the form, but lacks the spirit.

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Insufficient planning by the leaders, apathy of the worshippers, poor quality music, and unkempt facilities all contribute to a worship experience that people approach with a sense of obligation and duty rather than expectation and joy.

On the other hand, passion speaks of an emotional connection that goes beyond intellectual consent and rote performance. It connotes eagerness, anticipation, expectancy and deep commitment. In spiritually passionate faith communities, there's a palpable air of expectancy as people gather for worship. As worship leaders and the congregation gather, they expect God to speak to them while they experience God's presence, his forgiveness, his hope, and his direction in their lives. Singing together, joining voices in prayer, listening to the word, and celebrating the sacraments all allow them to intermingle their lives with each other and they connect with God.

However, many times we unconsciously enter worship in an evaluative posture as if we were a restaurant critic preparing to check out a new diner or some audience member preparing to watch a stage play. We go through the service and we rate the sermon and by default the minister who prepared it. We evaluate the children's chat and the one who gave it. We listen for the one doing the morning prayer to trip over his tongue. We are just waiting for the musicians to hit a clinker note either on their instrument or with their voices. "How was the service?" Either the sermon was too long or too boring. The praise team was too loud, or the liturgist wasn't loud enough. The children were too noisy and so was that guy in the back snoring. The sanctuary was too hot or too cold. We didn't come to worship; it's as if we came to give worship a grade so we could record in on the worship team's report card.

But I think there is a huge problem with that evaluative / report card mindset. It's a terrible problem that needs to be addressed, so we're going to address it right now. The problem with the report card mindset is this: we fail to remember who does the worshipping and who is the audience for our worship. When we have that mindset, we think of the sanctuary as some sort of theater with a stage up front where the actors are acting out worship. The audience is seated out there watching the actors act out the worship. And in stage front is this little cubby-hole for the prompter to sit and prompt whoever is on stage to remind them what they are supposed to do as they act out worship.

The real problem comes in when we change the words actors, audience and prompter to fit a worship setting on Sunday morning. I think most people tend to think that the actors on the stage are the worship leaders in a worship service. They are the ones who are up front either in the pulpit, the lectern or the chancel area, so they must be the worship leaders. Most times we feel like the audience in the theater equates to the congregation in the pews. They come to sit and watch the performance whether it is a stage play or worship. And finally, the prompter sitting in the cubby-hole is God who is prompting the worship leaders to direct worship in the format that everyone is accustomed to seeing. After all, God is directing this whole show, isn't he?

I think we've got this all wrong. I think we put the descriptions in the wrong places. So let's go back and try again. First and foremost, we have to remember who is the object of our worship, or who is the audience of our play. We must to remember that we who come to worship are not the audience. The audience of our worship is God, not us. Secondly, we must understand that it isn't the worship leaders who are doing the worshipping, it is the congregation. The faith family gathers to worship, not watch worship. You all are the actors on the stage, performing worship of God. Finally, the little prompters setting in the cubby-hole are the worship leaders. These are the folks

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reminding you of how you are to worship. This is a much more correct version of roles in worship: God is the audience, the congregation is the actors, and the worship leaders are the prompters.

I know you are probably not going to remember this tomorrow morning. Who am I kidding, you probably won't remember this at lunch today. I know it's hard to remember things just based on a sermon, no matter how good it is. But you will not soon forget when Pastor Gary made you get up and move during the sermon. So, that's what we are going to do. I want everyone who is under 75 years old to make your way into the front. That's right, get off your seat and on your feet. Mike, Steven, I don't want you in the chancel, I want you down here with me in the cubby-hole for the prompter. {Make this happen and keep talking during the move.}

Now that you're all up here I want you to remember why you're up here. This is to remind you that during our worship services, you are not the audience, you are the worshippers. God is the audience. Those folks left out there represent God. God is the one out here listening to YOUR worship. YOUR worship needs to be pleasing to him. In other words, when you fill out that report card in your head every Sunday about how worship was, you are really grading your own worship. You see, you shouldn't really be coming to church to "get something out of it." You should be coming to church to worship God and when you worship God well, you will get something out of it. OK, now let's return to your seats.

The responsibility for the quality of spiritual life in the congregation does not reside only with the pastor. And committees and staff can't do it on their own, either. What each person brings to worship shapes the worship experience for everyone as much as what he or she finds there. Passionate worship begins with each worshipping individual. And one way to deepen the experience of worship is for each person to actively prepare his or her own heart, mind and soul before attending. Nothing reinforces the practice of prayer and learning from scripture more than a vibrant personal devotional life. How do you prepare for worship? Have you had any personal worship time at all this past week? Do you regularly read scriptures or listen to Christian music or have prayer time? Have you done those things that open your heart to worship and warm your spirit? Or do you come in here cold from last week not having done anything to nurture your own spirit throughout the week?

Passionate worship begins with our love for God, our desire to open ourselves to God's grace and our eagerness for a relationship with God. People come to worship to connect with God, to connect with one another and with themselves in order to feel restored, refreshed, remembered and reminded. We wonder what God has to do with all that's going on inside of us and in the world around us. We want to know that having a relationship with Christ changes our life. In our searching, God finds us, heals us, sustains us, and forms us in the new birth of Christ. Worship is God's gift and task, a sacred trust that requires our utmost and highest. So let's give God our utmost and our highest. When we come to worship, let's truly worship and not just sit back and watch as others worship.