

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church
Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

For a Day Against the Everyday
Psalm 100; Luke 24.44-53
Russ Dean, May 24, 2009



I open with the words of pastor and professor, Tex Sample, from an article about worship entitled, “The Practices of Significance”:

Imagine a stadium full of 50,000 people. They are standing and singing and dancing with the performer. Percussive and moving lights bathe them in rapid fire and sweeping lumination. They are surrounded by the sound and beat of an overwhelming P.A. system. They are fully engaged in this environment, this ecology of celebration. Each paid \$50 plus to be there. They are thrilled.

And they are singing “Achy Breaky heart.”

Lawrence Grossberg argues that one of the basic contradictions of the emerging electronic culture is that what is significant is not important and what is important is not significant. The concert above from a few years back embodies such a contradiction. I have no wish to be a moralizing bluenose who can see no value in a playful event, but I do believe we have something to learn about worship in both the event and the contradiction Grossberg names.¹

Amy and I have had the same experience, as have many of you. A decade ago we found ourselves in a packed Georgia Dome, on our feet, tingles running down our spines as we looked across a sea of humanity, many of those below us whose hands were in the air, a posture that looked strangely like that of charismatic worship, and we were singing with that throng in a bold unison: “Sing us a song you’re the piano man, sing us a song tonight... ‘cause we’re all in the mood for a melody, and you’ve got us feelin’ alright...”²

It was a down-right spiritual experience. I mean that quite literally. There was in the air that night, in that huge arena, something that could not be seen, something, something that could not be measured, empirically – but something that brought 70,000 adoring fans of Billy Joel and

¹ Tex Sample, “The Practices of Significance,” *Living Pulpit*, Jul-Sep 2003, p.36.

² From Billy Joel’s, “Piano Man.”

Elton John to their feet, and for a few moments gathered us in an ecstasy that was bigger than we were.

I typed in my manuscript at this point that the moment was significant, but not important... but thanks to the convenience of word-processing, that sentence was easily deleted. Because the more I reflected on that event, the more I realized that in a society that gets so little of the spiritual, a society that is drowning in a godless materialism, choking in an often, spiritless rationalism, any moment that brings people together, really together, with a sense of the something-more cannot be regarded as un-important. And though that moment was not overtly religious, because it had the power to unite people through that something-more, I also will not say that God was not in it.

So when have you experienced that something-more?

As one of the pastors of this church, do I dare expose myself, and your ministerial staff, who plan weekly worship... do I dare I ask if it has been here?

As they write about the African-American worship experience, Ella and Henry Mitchell say that our race has been misnamed. Not *homo sapiens*, they say (the thinking being) – we would be more aptly named *homo fides* (the believing, worshipping being). Citing archaeological evidence from the discoveries of the oldest humans, evidence from burial sites that show that from the dawn of consciousness the thinking animal was a believing animal, the Mitchells believe “the worship of God is still based on an unashamed, subconscious, gut-level, and culture-wide holistic sense of need.”³ The worshipping creature. It is simply who we are.

³ Living Pulpit, Jul-Sep 03, “Worship: A Rethinking,” Ella and Henry Mitchell, p.18-19.

Are you aware of your own need to worship? How much do you miss it when you are not here? More importantly, if the Mitchell's are right (I think they are), that this need is built-in, soul-deep – where and how do you worship if you miss the Sunday morning hour? If Americans need to worship, but weekly attendance in organized institutions of worship, continues to decline... where are we worshipping? How are we worshipping? What are we worshipping?⁴

If people need to worship, but turn from the worship of God in an institutional format... what becomes “god” for them? And what affect does worshipping... leisure, or worshipping pleasure, or worshipping professional football, or worshipping that next paycheck... what affect does it have on individual hearts and souls, and on the collective soul of a city or nation, when we give our need to worship “the Beyond in our midst”⁵ (God) – when we give that over to worshipping the many gods who are simply made by the whim of the moment?

We have had several new members recently who, like many of you, express their delight in having found this church – this kind of church. The particular members I am thinking of each shared an experience of having looked, frustratingly, for a place where they could exercise their *minds* in faith – along with their *hearts and souls and strength* (Mark 12.30), and in two different cases they had ended up in the Unitarian church. But something there, they said, was not quite right for them, either. One expressed her experience poignantly: “I found the Unitarian experience intellectually satisfying, but I came away each week finding that I still needed to worship.”

⁴ These questions need not sound as “preachy” as they may be interpreted. I am quite aware of the decline of the institutional church, and though I am still a staunch supporter, I do understand that many Americans now find their “worship” need filled in places other than a sanctuary. To the extent that a traditional, vocational can, I give my blessing to those who can no longer worship in a more traditional manner. And I believe this is a trend that will not be reversed – so I would also ask my questions to them – “If you are ‘worshipping’ at the coffee house, with the reading of the morning paper, a collection of poetry, a gathering of friends, do you recognize that you are worshipping? And, how and what are you worshipping?”

⁵ This is one of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s descriptions/names for God.

As we Make Our Way with the early Church,⁶ as we look to their forming experience, we find at the heart of what it meant to be a follower of Jesus was to be a worshiper of God. When he had departed from them, "... [They] returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God" (Luke 24.53).

The renowned theologian of the last century, Paul Tillich once said, "The Spiritual Presence cannot be received without a sacramental element, however hidden the latter might be."⁷ It is the same thing that John Vannorsdall says, even admitting "all the difficulties of the organized church." [point to bulletin] But let us not fool ourselves, he reminds us, "about the physical nature of the embodiment that is [out] own lives."⁸ In other words, because we have bodies, physical bodies, and because we are creatures that live in a world that can be felt and tasted and touched and seen – that is how the spiritual will come. So the Psalmist could say, *Taste and see that the Lord is good* (Psalm 34.8, among other references). And, *I was glad when they said unto me, 'Let us go into the house of the Lord'*" (Psalm 122.1) – a physical place, where the sights in that room, and the sounds, and the smells... all the physical experiences are shaped, intentionally, to call our attention to the divine, which is always at work, in sacramental ways (tasteable, touchable, see-able) among us.

⁶ In the month of May, we are looking at the experience of the early church – what experience was formative to the development of that church. We have answered: 1) A commitment to the Way of Jesus; 2) A belief that "new birth," or "second chances" are integral to our faith; 3) A conviction to serve others; 4) Today's exhortation to the worship of God. Next week we will look at the role hope played, and plays, in the Church's theology and life.

⁷ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Living Pulpit, Jul-Sep 2003, p.28.

⁸ One of the Meditations printed in today's bulletin was this: "I see all the difficulties of the organized church. But where else do you hear in a systematic, ongoing, rhythmic way the witness about what God is doing in human history? Where else does a group of people pause to reflect on their lives in the presence of that witness concerning God? Call it confession. Call it praise. But where else do we have the incarnation of values via hymns, prayers, rituals, stained glass windows, and buildings?... People who say they can do without the institutionalized church fool themselves about the physical nature of the embodiment that is their own lives." John Vannorsdall, *Questions of Faith*, quoted in *The Living Pulpit*, July-Sep, 2003, p.48.

Though if it had been mine to design, this beautiful sanctuary would have had more color in it (I love Sara Eggleston's beautiful banner that fills the baptistery), Charlie Milford recalled for me the first moment he walked into this cathedral-inspired room. It was designed by the architect, said Charlie, so that nothing would interfere with the worshiper's attention to God. No stained glass. No visual icons (the cross above the baptistery was added later). Just a vaulted ceiling, directing the worshiper's attention upward... to God. And Charlie said, "It brought tears to my eyes." A room.

I believe human beings are worshiping creatures. That there is something buried within the depth of our souls that calls us to give our selves over to... something more. So I urge you to make worship a central part of your life and faith. Not for my sake. Not for the sake of numbers. Not for anyone's ego. But because we need it. Collectively. We need each other to worship. I think this is even more so in the highly impersonal, technological world in which we live.

Your ministerial staff truly believes in the importance of worship, and its centrality for the life of the church. It is our Day Against the Everyday. The day that reminds us who we are in this big world. What is important. How to live. How to love. How to serve.⁹ There may be nothing we do that is more important than the hour we spend here. (I don't have time to defend that statement, over against the importance of Family Promise and Room in the Inn and all the necessary mission enterprises we have undertaken, but I will stand by it. We can fight about it later if you'd like!) It is so important to us, that we give a great deal of time planning, and thinking, and may I tell you... fretting and worrying and pondering... Where are they? [pointing across sanctuary to the empty pews] (Not because numbers is important to our egos... but

⁹ Also from the bulletin, from Dorothee Soelle: "Religion is a form of rebelling against individual and institutional banality. Religions set off a special day, the Sabbath, a festival, against the everyday."

because worship is essential to our collective soul.) And why are the cars lined up down the street, people waiting in line to get in for the show and to experience the fog machine and the colored lights, and the feel-good... when the stirring strains of Haydn, and the carefully constructed silence, and the intentionally crafted word, every word... at times feels as if it is a waste of our time?

So... how shall we worship? And what role should attendance (or the lack there of) play in our worship-planning? While Amy and I are away this summer (on sabbatical) we will take our family to different houses of worship, and in those experiences, and in our reading and reflecting and praying and refreshing our souls, we want to give a great deal of thought to this issue. How shall we worship? And what about this room... that at the moment is too large for our worshiping numbers? How does it adversely affect our worship? (For the community we experience at Park Road Baptist Church is NOT reflected in the distance which is set between us when we come to worship God.) I said to you nine years ago in a sermon, "if it is the market that brings you... it will be the market you find when you get to church."¹⁰ And I still believe it. In other words, if the style and structure of worship is driven by the forces of a market-economy (what the consumers demand is what the manufacturers will produce), all you will find is the market when you get here. Our numbers would increase if we gave over to this method of creating worship. (What kind of music do you think would attract the most? Should we use more

¹⁰ The sermon, from February of 2003 (*When the Church Speaks Too Loudly*) uses a line from a David Wilcox song called "Advertising Man." Regarding the song and the Church I say this: "Wilcox's song is a scathing critique -- the smokers in the crowd will understandably not appreciate his sarcasm -- but the song is not a jab at you as much as it is a criticism of all of us -- our inability to fend off the great cons of the advertising god. And the Church of America is in real danger of completely losing its authentic voice, because it too is now crying wildly in the streets, advertising God with the same racket and rancor, and often with the same tactics and scruples as its 'competitors.' Churches across the country are, in fact, seeking advice and developing evangelistic strategies from secular marketers and "ad men." And, these tactics work. The 'mega churches' of recent years are proof in the pudding. But what I want to know is how much of the Church is left when the market gets through shaping it? If the market brings you to the Church -- is it the Church, or the Market that you find, when you get there?"

drama? Would they come for a band? etc...) There is no doubt. But what would we really have when they all got here? I refuse, as does your entire ministerial staff, to sell out to the market as the driving force for creating the worship experience – even if our numbers reflect that decision.

On the other hand... times, they are a changin'. They always have been. And how we worship will have to reflect the changing times, or we will find ourselves worshipping our Tradition, not a Living God. So what role should the technology (of a technology-drenched culture) play, even in a thoughtful, crafted, liturgical worship? And how open will we be?

I believe that the good news of the gospel... good news of love and forgiveness, of hope and life and peace, is too good not to share. I believe that the Way of Jesus, with its ethical demands – loving our neighbor (even when some call them the “enemy”), caring about the last and the least among us, dying to ourselves for the sake of one another... I believe this Way is too life-giving not to share. And I believe that the place called Park Road Baptist Church... is a secret we are doing too good a job of keeping. And because of this, I believe we owe it to ourselves and to this community, to ask how the structure we present to this community, can best communicate the commitments we embody. Even if it means that your pastor occasionally needs to finish the sermon [move beyond pulpit]... from here.¹¹

Worship is too important to not think carefully and plan deliberately every moment. And worship is too important for us to make an idol of “how we’ve always done it.”

¹¹ Because PRBC has a long history of traditional, liturgical worship, it would be anathema to some of our members, for the minister to step from the pulpit, and march around on the rostrum to preach, as many pastors do. Though I have no intention of beginning to preach this way, for the effect, I moved beyond the sermon when I spoke the final words of this sermon. And I remarked, in a mocking humor, “Some of you just puckered-up a little, didn’t you!?”

The wise rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel, says, “Worship and living are not two separate realms. Unless living is a form of worship, our worship has no life.”¹² So may God inspire our worship. May God inspire our living. That both may give life to this world.

[move beyond pulpit] May it be so!

¹² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, Living Pulpit, Jul-Sep 2003, p.29.