

AN INVITATION TO BE HUMAN

Practicing (for) the Kingdom: Call to Worship
Genesis 1:27-28; 1 John 4:7-8, 16, Psalm 150

I'm going to begin this new series of sermons
with an audacious claim,
which I predict you will immediately question,
and which I will then try to defend.
I need to make a good case for this claim,
because this whole worship series—
lasting nine weeks—
is based *entirely* on this claim.
So it better be *true*.

The claim is this:

The practice of Christian worship
is the primary way
we become who God intended us to be.

Not *a* way . . . not one of many *possible* ways to choose from—
but the primary way
we become who we were created to be as human beings.

From a Christian faith perspective,
there is nothing more important we can do
to be formed for the life God intended,
than to regularly gather in community with others
and engage in the historic practices of Christian worship.

I make such a claim,
because of what I have come to believe it means to be human.

To be human is to love.

That's not a *quote* from scripture, but I *get* it from scripture.
Scripture *does* say, clearly and repeatedly,
that *God* is love,
that God's nature and intention and orientation is love.
God has a deep longing for communion and intimacy
with us, and with all of creation.

We also know from scripture that God's intention
in creating us human beings,
was that we might reflect God's own image.
We heard this from Genesis 1 this morning:
God created humankind—male and female—in God's image.

So if *God's* nature is love, and *humans* are made in God's image,
then to be human is to love.
It's inescapable—this God-love/human-love connection.
Scripture makes it most clear, perhaps, in 1 John 4:
“Whoever does *not* love does not know God, for God is love . . .
God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God.”

We were created in such a way that what we love defines who we are.
It forms our identity.
The philosopher Descartes famously said, “I think, therefore I am.”
Might be more accurate to say, “I love, therefore I am.”

We're not talking about loving pizza, or loving the White Sox,
or even about loving another person.
We're talking about our ultimate love—
the longing to which we are fundamentally oriented,
the core desire that governs our vision of the good life,
that shapes how we are in the world,
We're talking about what we desire above all else.
Therefore, we're talking about what we *worship!*

It's not what I *think* that shapes my life from the bottom up,
it's what I *desire*, it's my ultimate love.
Our desires then shape our thinking, and shape our actions.
The question we are dealing with in this series is
“What shapes our desires?”
And the answer we are proposing is,
“The practices of Christian worship.”

We know what God's desire is aimed toward—
the beauty and wholeness and restoration of all creation,
and *most* of all, a restored and redeemed humanity.
So as persons created in God's image,

we become most fully human,
when our desire is aligned with God's desire.

The Kingdom of God—
the restored reign of peace, justice, righteousness, shalom—
is to be the aim of our desire.
We must desire the Kingdom.

We live in a world, however,
that is shaping our desires in *other* directions.

In his book, *Desiring the Kingdom*, philosopher James K. A. Smith
makes a point that practices shape desires.
Desires don't change just because we decide to change them.
We don't primarily think our way toward new desires.
We act our way toward them.
Thinking straight *helps*, of course, but it's not enough.
We know that from experience.
Just believing something is the right thing to do,
often doesn't translate into motivation, or desire.

The culture we live in has figured that out long ago.
So there are whole systems of secular practices and rituals
that have no purpose other than to shape desire,
and therefore, behavior.

If you got anywhere close to a mall or major retail district
during this Christmas shopping season,
you *know* what I'm talking about.
Even *before* you walk in the door,
the architecture invites you in.
Then the friendly greeters, colorful displays,
cheerful music,
exciting video images . . .
everything is geared toward shaping your desires,
so that you act in a particular way,
to buy particular products from a particular store.

How successful do you think the retail industry would be

if they appealed only to your rational thought process,
and not to your gut—your longings and desires?
What if stores were only metal warehouses,
and products were packaged only in plain cardboard boxes,
and advertisements were only type-written lists of products
on 8½ by 11 sheets of paper?
That would be perfectly adequate for us to find what we really need.
But without the rituals and images and sounds and smells—
all these practices the retail industry has perfected,
they would be powerless to shape our *desires*
that make us want to buy their products.

And what about professional sports?
The Super Bowl is around the corner.
What an amazing and complex system of rituals and icons and
pseudo-religious practices
all aimed at shaping our desires,
and deepening our loyalty,
and forming our very identity.

And I could go on and on,
naming other cultural institutions that do the same thing.
I'm not saying they are wrong. I'm saying they are smart.
They know they will not influence us
just by appealing to our rationality and intellect.
They must get us to participate in practices and rituals
that will shape our desires.

So Smith makes the case in his book,
that the practices and rituals of Christian worship
are of fundamental importance—
are absolutely essential—
if our goal is have our desires shaped
toward God and God's Kingdom.

Going to the mall or the stadium are just two,
of countless secular practices and rituals and liturgies
that we engage in every day

and which shape our desire toward
some vision of human flourishing.
We *need* the practices of Christian worship
to *re-shape* us toward God's vision of human flourishing—
life in the Kingdom of peace, of justice,
of righteousness, of shalom.

When we gather as communities of disciples of Jesus,
and join together in the practices of worship,
we are practicing for the kingdom,
in fact, practicing the kingdom.
We are learning to desire the kingdom.

In *some* churches—
I could be so bold as to say in *many* or *most* churches—
some of the historic practices of Christian worship
have fallen into neglect, or been forgotten completely,
because the church has become confused
about the nature and purpose of worship.

Instead of seeing worship as a set of communal practices
necessary to shape our desires toward God and God's Kingdom . . .
Instead of seeing the practices of worship
as essential to reshaping our identity as a people of God
who reflect God's image to the world . . .
we have settled for less in worship.

For instance, worship is *not* primarily a time to get refueled.
Many people use that language to say why they come to worship.
But when worship is mostly about getting what I need
to help me survive the stress in my life,
worship inevitably becomes me-focused instead of God-focused.

And worship is also *not* just a sermon sandwich.
Where everything else that happens,
before and after the sermon,
is just something to hold the meat.
Important as it is, to break open the word
and proclaim the Gospel in fresh ways—

and I *do* believe it's important,
or I wouldn't put so much time and effort *into* it—
still . . . worship is *not* primarily an intellectual exercise.
Worship's aim is not primarily cognitive or scholastic,
or educational in a traditional sense.

And worship is *not* primarily about getting outsiders
to come to church and join us here.
When worship is seen as the main entry point for seekers,
then, of course, we downplay those practices
that might seem strange to outsiders,
or might be a bit off-putting,
hard to enter into, or hard to explain.

No, worship is about God's people coming together
to be re-formed, re-shaped, re-constituted
as the peculiar people of God.
We come to bow ourselves in humility,
in a collective act of submission and adoration,
because it's what we were created to do.
It's to fulfill our created purpose and destiny—
to reflect the light of God in a darkened world,
and to faithfully bear the image of God to the rest of creation.

There are a *multitude* of other ways, any *number* of other places to go,
where we can get emotionally re-fueled for the week,
where we can have our intellect stimulated,
where we can be winsome to outsiders.
But there is only *one place* I know of,
that exists specifically for the purpose of shaping our desires
toward God and God's Kingdom.
And that is the people of God gathered together, practicing worship.

Now . . . do we get our needs met in worship?
Do we sometimes come away feeling re-fueled?
Yes. That would be a natural by-product
of living into our created purpose.
When we are practicing the life God *made* us for,
we *should* sense a greater energy, purpose, joy, and freedom.

But the point is, it's a by-product.
It's not why we come here.

And do we sometimes come away with
our thoughts stimulated? our intellect challenged?
Do we get educated in worship?
I hope so.

But that, too, is a *result* of authentic worship,
when we hear the words of scripture,
and rehearse the story of salvation,
we learn, or relearn, who we are and who God is.
But education is a result, not the reason.

And do outsiders who seek faith in God, find it when they come?
Well, what *better* place to get a picture of life with God,
than a gathering of God's motley crew of stumbling disciples,
praying together, singing together,
and *despite* their differences,
practicing common rituals
that mark their identity and place of belonging.
We dare not dumb down or strip away the practices of worship,
under some illusion that
a stripped-down, easy-to-swallow Gospel sound-bite,
is even *remotely* helpful
to someone trying to make meaning out of a complicated life.
If we back away from the full range of practices
that worship a God who is awesome and holy
and loving and demanding
and gentle and powerful
and forgiving and justice-seeking,
then we run the danger of making God *not even interesting*.
People are looking for a God who actually makes a difference.

When we become clear about the purpose of worship,
when we engage in *all* the practices of worship
that re-shape our desires,
that re-orient our loves and our longings,
then these other by-products of worship will fall into place.

In true worship
we don't have to *try* to make God interesting,
we don't have to *try* to make worship meet our needs,
we don't have to *try* to teach a lesson.

We just come, do what we were called and created to do,
and God will take care of the rest.

Today's practice of worship that we're focusing on
is the call to worship.
We had the call issued to us in various ways—
by a shofar, through scripture, through singing,
and through the words of our worship leader.
And in a *sense*,
this sermon has been yet another extended call to worship.

I am inviting us to rediscover our human calling.
We worship because we are called to do so.
We come together from our various walks of life,
because God summons us.
We are called out, and called together.
That's what the word "church" means: *ekklesia*, "called out."

We, the church, aren't here today just as a voluntary society.
We haven't *just* voluntarily associated with each other
because we want to build relationships,
have good fellowship,
share good music,
and get some moral instruction for ourselves and our children.

The theological truth . . . the God-honest truth . . .
is that we have been chosen, redeemed by God,
called, justified, and claimed by God for God's purposes.

Remember that—every Sunday morning you come,
and you hear someone issue a "call to worship."
You are *not* here because you are opting to associate with us.
You are here because God called you here.

Now, before I *close*, I want to make something clear.
I don't want people to go away thinking
that everything important in the church
happens here in the big gathering on Sunday morning.
That's the *last* thing I want to communicate.

Yes, I just preached that the practices of Christian worship
are necessary for re-shaping our desires.
But I was *not* preaching just to bump up church attendance.

The communal practice of Christian worship
can happen in many different venues.
It can happen in our homes, in public places,
it can be large or small,
spontaneous or planned,
clergy can be present or absent.

God's people can gather, in response to God's call,
wherever and whenever they choose,
and practice prayer, and listen to scripture,
hear the Gospel articulated,
sing songs of the faith,
confess and be forgiven,
share the Lord's Supper,
and pronounce blessings on each other.
But *whatever* we do,
let us *not* neglect actually *coming together*
in answer to God's call,
and engaging in the communal practices of Christian worship.
These are *not* optional for the fully-lived Christian life.

To those who think their week is full enough,
and that Sunday morning is an ideal time to sleep in,
or relax with a newspaper and coffee,
or have quality time with the spouse or kids . . .

To those who say they chose to worship God in nature . . .

To those who choose to skip worship and just come to Sunday School . . .
I say . . . *good*.

There is no problem with those choices . . .
if you have carved out *another* space in your week,
to gather with God's people
in response to God's call to worship,
and engaged, together, in the full range
of these essential practices.

God's invitation to us, to come together and worship,
is nothing less than an invitation to be fully human.
This is one invitation we cannot afford to pass up,
if we want to live the life for which God created us.

So, with the psalmist, let's once again,
issue the call to worship . . . to each other
the call to praise God together.
Take your bulletin, and let's read this together.
East, organ side. West, piano side.
All together . . .

All: Praise the Lord.

East: Praise God in his sanctuary:

West: praise God in his mighty heavens.

East: Praise God for his acts of power;

West: praise God for his surpassing greatness.

East: Praise God with the sounding of the trumpet.

West: Praise God with the harp and lyre.

East: Praise God with timbrel and dancing.

West: Praise God with the strings and pipe.

East: Praise God with the clash of cymbals,

West: praise God with resounding cymbals.

**All: Let everything that has breath, praise the Lord.
Praise the Lord.**

—Phil Kniss, January 9, 2011