

The Way We Worship

Week 2

There is an old adage, originating in the fields of engineering and design, that states, “*Form follows function.*” To say it perhaps more philosophically, the How follows the Why and the What.

This holds true, or ought to hold true, in worship as well. Worship is a function. The form worship takes is called Liturgy. But here’s the thing...there is no one “right” form. There are all kinds of forms, all kinds of liturgies.

But here’s the deal...over time, we get so accustomed to a particular form that we end up defining something by its form instead of its function, or we become so overly dependent upon one particular form that we limit ourselves to that form.

An example I like to use is transportation. Transportation is a function...to get from one place to another. It can take many forms: bike, airplane, boat, car, train, etc. Now if I ask you which one is the “best” form, I suspect your answer would, rightly, be “It depends.” If your desired destination is Hawaii, there are only a couple forms of transportation that will get you there. There is a time and a place for different forms of transportation. At the same time, there’s likely one particular form we are most accustomed to and use on a daily basis...a car. But we’d never want to limit the function of transportation to just that one form, would we? It’s nice, and necessary, to have other forms of transportation when we need them.

Similarly, worship is a function...to express our love and devotion, our loyalty and allegiance to God. There are different forms that it can take. What’s the “right” form or the “best” form? That’s really the wrong question. A better question would be, given our goal of worship and factoring in our context, time and place, our situation, how would God like us to express our worship to Him? (Because worship is about God, not us, after all.) Even factoring all that in, there’s still likely not a “right” or “best” form. But if we’re going to worship communally, we do need to come to some agreement on HOW we will worship together.

- *What forms of worship help you to express your love and devotion, your loyalty and allegiance to God?*

Let’s go back to this word Liturgy. The word comes from the Greek word “leitourgia” which literally means “*public service*” or “*the work of the people*”. Hmm, that’s interesting. If someone were to visit our congregation in worship on a Sunday morning, what might they observe? How would they describe the “work of the people”? They would likely note a handful of people who are “working”, who are doing something, participating in some way, performing some action. And they’d likely note that the majority of the people seem to be spectating, simply watching the “performers”. Occasionally some of the people in the congregation will speak or sing in unison. Our visitor might walk away wondering, “*How was that an expression of love and devotion, loyalty and allegiance to God?*”

To be fair, much of worship has to do with the posture of the heart, a disposition of the will, which is hard to observe from the outside. Nevertheless, when someone says they “love” something or Someone, we reasonably expect to see some form of outward behavior or expression.

- *If someone says, “I love Jesus.”, what would you expect to see from them as an expression of that love? If a group of people collectively say, “We love Jesus.”, what would you expect to see from them as an expression of that love?*
- *Consider the various elements of a CUMC worship service. How would you explain each element to a visitor/newcomer/someone completely unfamiliar with worship? What is each element trying to express? What is the importance of each element? How is each element a “work of the people”?*
- *If you were to visit a different congregation, what do you think it would take, or what would you need to observe, to come to the conclusion that these people really love God?*
- *When you come to worship, do you expect to participate or spectate? Explain. Or, what does participation look like for you? Or, how are you participating?*
- *If you were to design a liturgy, how would you try to get everyone involved in expressing their love and devotion, loyalty and allegiance to God? What elements would you use to facilitate that?*

Let’s consider the difference between personal/private worship and communal/collective worship. We tend to think of “liturgy” more in the context of communal worship. But if you think about it, you’re actually doing more “work”, you’re more actively involved, in personal worship.

Earlier this year we went through the book *Sacred Rhythms* by Ruth Haley Barton which explored a variety of spiritual disciplines/practices and culminated in a Rule of Life. Guess what...that’s really just another way of saying liturgy, just on a more personal level. It’s the habits we adopt in order to be formed into the way and image of Jesus. This is Worship! It’s a way of showing love, devotion, loyalty, and allegiance to King Jesus as we learn to offer ourselves more fully to Him.

Sometime before I arrived at CUMC, I understand that y’all went through the book *Liturgy of the Ordinary* by Tish Harrison Warren, which is all about learning to worship in all the little nooks and crannies of our lives...learning to see every little daily detail of our lives as an occasion to worship. (That might be a good book to revisit during this series.)

Again, liturgy is just the form that worship takes, regardless of whether it’s personal/private or communal/corporate.

- *When it comes to your own personal/private worship, how do you turn your attention to God and express your love and devotion, loyalty and allegiance to Him? What does your personal liturgy look like? Or, what elements do you incorporate in order to worship?*

If you're familiar with the Old Testament then you're probably aware that the forms of worship, the How and even the When, were highly prescribed and detailed. Interestingly, when we turn to the New Testament, worship is described but not prescribed. There seems to be more freedom in form. Have you ever wondered why that is?

Part of the answer, of course, is that with Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, the age of animal sacrifice, which was a large part of the prescribed worship, came to an end. As big and as important as that is, there was still more at play. Remember that the Law of Moses (the Torah) not only governed religious life for Israelites, it was to govern all of life, much like a constitution for a nation. With the Great Commission and the call to proclaim the Gospel to the entire world, crossing all kinds of national, ethnic, and cultural barriers, the forms that worship would take as the Gospel was received by various peoples/cultures needed to be able to become more expansive and flexible. God loves all people, and He embraces the various forms of love expressed back to Him (within certain limitations, of course...worship still needs to keep in mind the character and will of God).

So worship can take many forms and expressions. It simply needs to be a sincere/genuine reflection of the worshippers' love, devotion, loyalty, and allegiance to God. Worship can also take on, or express, various moods covering the whole range of human experience and emotion.

This is why the book of Psalms is such a gift to us. The writers of the Psalms span the gamut of emotions. The beauty and power of the Psalms are their honesty, their realness, their rawness. To say it another way, God would prefer us to come to Him and honestly express our anger or confusion or doubt or sadness than to come to Him putting on a show. We never need to fake it for God. We know this through, or because of, the Psalms.

Now here's the challenge. On our own, in private/personal worship, it is much easier to be honest before God. In communal worship, for a whole host of reasons, that can be more difficult. For example, you might show up to service really down, but the mood of the service for that day is really upbeat. Or the opposite could be true...the service is very somber but you're really happy and excited. What do we do in such a situation? It might be tempting to fake it for those around us. It might be tempting to leave.

This is where and why I think it is so important to remember that **WORSHIP IS ABOUT GOD...NOT ABOUT YOU AND ME**. Our emotions don't need to match the emotions of those around us. Communal worship is not about uniformity (and good liturgy should keep this in mind). It is very unrealistic to think that we all show up for a worship service in the same frame of mind and heart. Healthy communal worship allows people to come as they are, acknowledging our differences, but then turning our attention towards God with whatever we bring that day.

Now let's go back to the concept of liturgy (remember, the work of the people). It is tempting to think of liturgy as something some congregations have/use while others do not or to think in categories of liturgical churches and non-liturgical churches. This is really an unhelpful way of thinking. There is no such thing as a non-liturgical church...every congregation has some form of liturgy. Some might call it "high liturgy" or "low liturgy" or more "formal" liturgy and "informal" liturgy...but there's always some liturgy in place. We might have our preferences and opinions about different types of liturgy or different styles of worship. But, again, please let me remind us: **WORSHIP IS ABOUT GOD...NOT ABOUT YOU AND ME.** Our preferences/opinions aren't the point. We are worshippers, not customers or consumers. It's about what we give/offer, not about what we get from a service.

- *Why do you attend corporate worship? (Try to answer this question without referring to what you get out of it.)*

Another reason we worship is because we BECOME like what we worship. We worship in order to BECOME more like the One we worship. One thing we know about God is that He loves people...all people. This is one of the main reasons why we gather TOGETHER to worship. By being together we have the opportunity to love one another. In fact one of the main ways we worship God is by loving one another well. A regular practice of gathering with people we may or may not like that much in order to learn to love them is very God-honoring (i.e. worship), and it forms us in a positive way. Conversely, when we leave a congregation because we don't like the people, or the style of worship, or the preaching, or the liturgy as a whole, we've made it about us instead of God...thus missing the whole point of worship.

On the point of making it about us instead of God, another way we do that is by being concerned about what people think about us. If/when we hold back, or are more reserved, because we're afraid of what others will think about us...then we've made it about us and not about God. Or, when we try to impress others by our religious-ness or piety, we've made it about us and not about God. Or, when we're gathered together on Sundays for worship and we're looking around judging/critiquing other people (what they're wearing, how or if they're participating, wondering about their sincerity, etc.) then we've made it about us instead of about God.

- *When we're gathered together for worship, where do you find your mind going? How do you stay focused and engaged?*
- *When, or how, have you been challenged to worship even when your personal preferences weren't being met? How might this be viewed more as an invitation than a challenge?*

Learning to worship well is not easy...but it's very important. That's why we're taking the time to focus on it during this season.

Allow me to end this week with this final thought. Last week, through the prophets Isaiah and Amos, we saw that God does not like acts of worship that are for show, or going through the

motions, and that don't align with a heart that is truly bent toward loving Him and others. Jesus concurs with that sentiment: *"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from Me, you evildoers!'"* (Matthew 7:21-23) This demonstrates that we can do a lot of religious-y things, a lot of "good works" even, and not know Jesus. And if we don't actually know Him, how can we love Him? (And worship is how we express love to God.) So religiosity is not the goal.

Genuine love for God and neighbor is the goal. We worship personally/privately in order to cultivate our hearts toward God. We gather and worship communally/corporately in order to cultivate our hearts towards others and to see God's reflection in others. Combined they form us into people whose lives bear witness to the reality of God. God is then incarnated/enfleshed in us individually and collectively. As we worship God, we BECOME more like Him. What we'll notice is that our hearts get bent like His...toward a broken and hurting world that needs to know His love. This cultivating of our hearts toward God and others is our primary work/liturgy/participation. May we experience the freedom to use whatever form it takes to do this work well.

Next week, we'll explore this idea further...the idea of Worship as witness and service.

Soul Training Exercises (yes, that's plural)

1. The book of Psalms has been the "worship" book for God's people for millennia. The invitation this week, or rather, one of the invitations this week, is to start reading the Psalms. Perhaps just one a day. Make it a steady diet in your day. Note the ones you really resonate with. (There will be some that you won't resonate with at all...and that's OK.) Remember, the Psalms are ancient songs and poetry...they will seem foreign, and that's OK. Notice the psalmist's heart toward God.
2. Next week (April 21) is our Mission Fair. Our desire is to see all the organizations that folks of CUMC are connected to. Additionally, perhaps God might nudge you towards one of the organizations represented. So this Soul Training is two-fold. First, please make it a point to attend. Perhaps make it a commitment as a Table Group to peruse the organizations together. (Sunday morning Table Groups...you are encouraged/urged to take your normal meeting time and browse together.) Second, pray for an open heart this week...open to what God might want to do through you (individually or as a Table Group)...maybe a divine connection will be made.
3. Lectio Divina. We used Philippians 2:1-11 last week. Let's stay in Philippians and use 3:7-14

Lectio Divina

Latin for Divine Reading. The desire is to encounter and surrender to the Living God by attending to Scripture. Lectio requires a humble, listening posture that is alert to the voice of God in Scripture.

Lectio

First read the text (lectio). You give it a slow, focused and naive reading of the passage.

Meditatio

Then re-read the same passage paying attention to what word or phrase stands out.

Oratio

Third, offer a simple prayer in response to God.

Contemplatio

After prayer, the text is read for the third time with the focus on listening for the Voice of God (contemplatio). This is a gift of grace and cannot be forced. Here is where you are hoping to interact with God, listening for His voice. You can ask the question, *"Lord, what do you want to do inside me?"*

Actio

Finally consider your response to God's Word and grace (actio). How can you make your life a gift to others in response to the Word?

Philippians 3:7-14