***GREAT ENDS: WORSHIP THE LORD!***

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Texts: Psalm 100 and Revelation 4:1-11

In this summer sermon series about the Great Ends of the Church we have considered two Great Ends to date:

the proclamation of the Gospel for the salvation of humankind, and

the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God.

Both are vital to who we are as the Church – proclaiming the Gospel to the world and caring for our brothers and sisters in the family of God. Yet for many Christians the first image that leaps to mind when thinking of *Church* is Sunday morning with people gathered for worship, though that image may take many different forms. For some Christians the church’s worship means praise, prayers and preaching in a spired cathedral; for others it is holy silence in an unadorned room; and for still others it is centered on the bread and cup blessed and shared in the sacrament of Holy Communion. For many Christians, music is at the heart of worship with guitars, drums and microphones; or an organ, piano and choir; or a cappella congregational singing in parts. For some Christians, worship is formal and dignified, for others it is free and spontaneous, and for many others it is something in between. “The maintenance of divine worship” is one of the Great Ends of the Church. What then is the *divine worship* we are maintaining? To answer that question perhaps we might ask a series of other questions: who, what, why, where, and when do you worship?

The *who* of divine worship is God, or at least it ought to be God. John Calvin claims that “it is worship of God alone that renders men (and women) higher than the brutes, and through it alone they aspire to immortality.”[[1]](#endnote-1) So at least for today you are higher than the brutes! Worship of God acknowledges that we are not gods. There is someone greater than we are, someone who holds our lives in divine hands and creates each of us for a divine purpose. That someone is the LORD, Yahweh by name, a name so holy to the people of Israel that they will not utter it, preferring instead to say *adonai* which means Lord. It is the Lord who spoke to Moses from the Burning Bush, the Lord who led the people out of Egypt, the Lord who gave the Ten Commandments to the people of Israel at the foot of Mt. Sinai, the LORD who sent Jesus into the world and raised him from the dead.

The first of those Ten Commandments given by the Lord is this: “I am Yahweh your God. You shall have no other gods before me.” This is not a general statement about a belief in some divine being. It is not a command that says, you should believe in a god. This is a commandment about belief in a particular God – Yahweh, *adonai* – the God who delivered the Israelites from Egypt. You shall have no other gods before Yahweh! Our God makes an absolute claim to first place in our lives and in our worship. There is no room for debate, no room for discussion, no room for compromise. You shall have no other gods before the Lord, no other gods whom you worship or serve. None! That’s the commandment!

So, are there any gods before Yahweh in your life? Are there any other gods, named or unnamed, who you worship? They come in various shapes and sizes, some with bold claims to grab your attention and others with subtle, insidious ways of charming your heart. They are gods of wealth, power and prestige, gods created in your image, gods dressed in red, white and blue or in your favorite sports team’s colors, gods who offer to adapt themselves to your desires rather than asking of you any change of heart. They are gods that will bid for your time, energy and attention, gods that will offer you everything except those things only the Lord can offer – hope, forgiveness, love, eternal life. What those other gods hold in common is this: they want to compete with the Lord for your worship. Who then is first in your life, first in your love and loyalty, first in your commitments, first in your worship? Is the Lord your God or is it someone or something else?

Theologian William Barclay suggests that we inevitably become like the god we worship.[[2]](#endnote-2) If you worship a god of vanity, you will become vain. If you worship a god of wealth, you will become materialistic. If you worship a god of leisure, you will become complacent. If you worship a god of war, you will become bellicose. But if you worship the Lord, the God of Abraham and Moses, the God who came to us in Jesus Christ, then with time you will become like Christ – full of love and compassion, forgiveness and peace, reconciled with God and seeking to reconcile with your neighbor, holding the promise of eternal life which is that version of “immortality” to which Calvin claims we all aspire in our worship. We don’t just worship ***a*** god, we worship a particular God: the Lord.

As the Church we declare that the Lord alone is God, and it is the Lord alone whom we worship and serve. In Jesus we have known the Lord and experienced the Lord among us. In Jesus we have heard God’s hopes, dreams and promises for us; in him we have received God’s grace. The Great End to maintain divine worship is a calling to keep the focus upon the Lord our God who is revealed to us in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen.

*Make a joyful noise to the Lord all the earth, worship the Lord with gladness, come into God’s presence with singing!* sings the psalmist. That joyful noise is some of the *what* of divine worship. The psalmist’s words inspire choirs to make joyful music to God with soaring songs of praise, but also invite the melodically challenged (and we know who we are) to join those songs with a joyful noise. Joyful noise is at the heart of faithful worship. It raises heartfelt praise and offers thanksgiving with gratitude. The psalmist urges us to approach worship with vibrant enthusiasm, enthusiasm that escapes our lips in joyful noise – like the roar of a jubilant crowd. Now some of you might find such noise a little unsettling in worship. Surely the *joyful noise* of the psalmist is more melodic than mere noise. Perhaps it is a glitch in the translation. Perhaps the psalmist meant “joyful sound”. Make a *joyful sound* to the Lord!

Feel free to adopt that translation as your own, but you ought to know that the *joyful sound* is a *joyful noise*. The Hebrew words are rooted in ringing cries and roaring shouts, not pensive peeps. It is the “Long live the Queen!” by which loyal subjects pay homage to their royal leader. It is praise drawn from a well deep in the human soul, praise that acknowledges dependence and gratitude for grace. It is that *joyful noise* we are urged by the psalmist to raise with glad worship and songs of praise, for God listens for the joyful noise of our lips and hearts. In the words of theologian Karl Barth:

*The Christian community sings. It is not a choral society. Its singing is not a concert. But from inner, material necessity it sings….What we can say and must say quite confidently is that the community which does not sing is not the community.*

We are a Covenant community that sings. We sing because we need to express the joy that is ours by faith. We sing, not to impress or entertain, but to express our thanks and praise to God. Whether we lift a sweet melody or raise a joyful noise, the psalmist wants us to come into God’s presence with a song in our hearts and on our lips. Why? Because we are a people who have much for which to be joyful!

If we offer muted praise instead of a truly joyful noise perhaps it is because we take for granted what God has done for us. We take for granted each breath that we take, each day that dawns, each blessing that is graciously bestowed upon us. We take for granted the cross and the empty tomb. We take for granted the miracle of creation and the daily miracles of God’s providential care in our lives. If we do not raise a truly joyful noise, perhaps it is because we take for granted our God.

But then again, not all worship is joyful noise. In silence, pensive prayer and preaching we worship the Lord too. God invites our prayers and urges us to reflect on the intersection of our lives and God’s Word. In worship we pause to pray – confessing our sins, expressing our thanks, listening for God’s voice, and seeking God’s help for ourselves and for others. In worship we create opportunities to hear God’s Word but also to reflect on its meaning in sermons; we bring symbols of God’s grace – bread and cup, water at the font – that remind us of God’s continuing presence with us. In worship we remember God in Christ and we are reminded, reassured and promised that God remembers us, always remembers us!

God remembers us within this sacred space, but also in our homes, at work and play, for the whole earth belongs to God. Our lives are not segregated into holy and unholy places; all our lives belong to God. So, the *where* of divine worship is everywhere and the *when* of divine worship is all the time. While we gather here each Sunday to worship together, we also worship in our homes – at dinner tables with a blessing (*Down with your head and up with your paws, thank the good Lord for the use of your jaws*), and at bedsides with our prayers (*Now I lay me down to sleep*), in devotions at church meetings and at home, and in whispered prayers throughout the day. In Lent and Advent we offer devotions to guide us through those holy seasons; we maintain a library of resources for use in personal and family worship outside these walls; and we post sermons online and in podcasts not just to help those who have trouble sleeping, but so that folks can worship wherever and whenever they choose.

In the King James Version, the 100th psalm reads, “Serve the Lord with gladness”, not “Worship the Lord with gladness”. In the Hebrew, *serve* and *worship* are one and the same word. Worship is serving God and serving is worshipping God. Jesus showed us how to serve – in love, with humility, compassion and joy. That is how we are to serve and worship, for our service is worship and our worship is service. Both of them should be full of gladness and full of joy, *everywhere* and *all the time*! For, our God is good: everywhere and all the time! So raise your alleluias! Praise the Lord! Worship and serve the Lord with gladness – with great gladness – here and everywhere, for the Lord is good. God’s steadfast love endures forever, and God’s faithfulness is for all generations, including ours, including you! Amen

1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Bk.I Ch.III.3 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. William Barclay, *The Ten Commandments for Today*, p.18 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)