**Nurtured through Worship**

Earth is crammed with Heaven.
Every bush is aflame with the fire of God,
but only those who see

take off their shoes.
The rest just pick the berries.

 Elizabeth Barrett Browning

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|  **Homework summary:** Please read pages 94 to 110. You'll have two exercises this week; one exercise exploring a worship service (pages 102 to 104), and one reflecting on scripture (pages 110 to 111). (Approximately 2.5 hours.) **Please make sure you take your workbook to worship with you this week in order to complete the exercise.** |

***Definition and purpose of worship***

Let’s begin by acknowledging that worship is not something that can be fully defined. It can mean everything from a style of music to the title for a judge. The word from which we get “worship” comes from the Old English, “worthship” meaning giving worth to something. At its most basic, Christian worship has something to do with taking time to focus our attention on God and to praise the One who creates us, loves us, and calls us into the ministry of Jesus Christ; for whom or what we worship, whom or what we trust, shapes everything about us.

Worship is what forms Christians into a distinct community. It is a time when we gather together to give praise to God and to be equipped to go back out as followers of Jesus who make a difference in the world. In part, worship is also the time when we practice living in the kingdom of God, including putting God into the centre of our lives.

In the last chapter we explored how being Uplifted by God’s Love is primarily about claiming the true source of our worth as human beings. The most basic of truths is that we, and all the people on earth, are beloved children of God, and that all the ways we are told to become more valuable and worthy as people, are nothing but deceptions and lies. What is at the heart of that spiritual practice is the recognition that God’s opinion of us counts for more than anyone else’s, including our own. This is why worshipping God is so important.

If God’s love for us is what can release us from bondage to everything from oppression to injustice; from addiction to despair; from the soul-sucking trash-talking to keeping up with the Joneses; then we need to focus our attention first on accepting that God’s opinion of us, and others, is paramount. But in order to believe that truth in our souls, and to make our opinion of ourselves secondary to God’s, we must first give our worth to God. That is, hold up God as being worthy of our admiration, our respect, our trust, and our loyalty.

Worship is the opportunity we have to give our worth, our value, our deepest selves to God, trusting that when we do, we will discover that we are safe, and liberated. The truth we uncover when we take that risk is that God never abuses or betrays that trust. We are completely safe because, as it turns out, God loves and cares about us infinitely more than we can or do. So that when we say to God, “You are smarter, wiser, more worthy, more valuable, more everything than I am,” we are not actually diminishing ourselves. Quite the contrary, we are being released from the burden of having to seek our fundamental worth through ourselves. If we give that responsibility over to God, we can be set free.

That is exactly what happens when we worship. We are in effect, saying to ourselves and each other that God is better at this love thing than we are. Actually, we are saying that God is better at everything, and that we are trusting, and confident that God loves us better than we can. And because of that level of trust, we know that if we listen to, and follow God’s plan for us, we are lifted from the terrible burden of trying to earn love, rather than accepting it.

That is the paradox we must embrace as Christians. The way of Christ, the path we have chosen to follow, is at the same time the path of obedience and the road to freedom. We know that sounds wrong to the modern ear, but that is the difference between being a Jesus admirer and his disciple. Maybe even as important, it is the key to being personally healed. Our freedom from having to earn our worth, to earn love, comes only when we stop worshipping the wrong things in favour of worshipping the right thing – the only one who can be trusted with such an important task.

The fallacy that is so prevalent in our culture today is that to worship God is to diminish yourself. But what that perspective fails to recognize is that everyone worships something or someone. Everyone gives their worth to something. The only question is to what? Is it to God, or is it to some ideology or addiction? Is it to Christ or is it to materialism, consumerism, or even scarier, oneself? Disciples of Jesus Christ make an intentional decision to give their loyalty, their trust, their lives over to God, knowing that by doing so, they are not actually giving anything up, but are entering into a relationship with God that will transform their lives and the lives of others through them.

Our individualistic culture works hard to convince us that the only person truly worth our time and effort is ourselves. By worshipping God, we are giving up our autonomy, one of the highest values in our society. That is true. In worshipping another we do give up our autonomy. But if we repeat what the very early church affirmed, “Christ is Lord,” we don’t do it because we are too weak or insecure to think for ourselves. We do it because we have come to realize that God is, in fact, bigger than we are. Plus, because God’s central characteristic is love, we trust that if we turn our lives over to Christ’s leading, we will be blessed. We give up our autonomy because we simply don’t believe that having to rely on ourselves for everything is all that it’s cracked up to be.

Worship is a time when we, as individuals and community, reaffirm that God is in charge. It is so easy to think that we should put ourselves at the centre of our lives. After all, we are told just that literally thousands of times every day through advertising. Therefore, worship provides us with a regular opportunity to take ourselves out of the centre and put Christ there. It is a consistent time to let go of the rather stressful and fraudulent view that we have to figure life out by ourselves.

There does come a time in the life of a disciple when they realize that to say, “Jesus is Lord” is the most liberating thing they can declare. Worship is like a weekly compass that re-orients our lives toward spiritual true north. In a society so hell-bent on convincing us that we as individuals are the centre of the universe

(mostly so they can sell us what they tell us we deserve), worship helps us to take ourselves out of the centre and put God back in.

Why is God’s path so much better than those we may devise for ourselves?

Because the path we follow, the way we do things, always affects the outcome. If we take shortcuts, or head off in our own directions, no matter how well intentioned we may be, we run the risk of making things worse, or at the very least, not as good as they might have been. Take for instance, the US’ decision to employ torture to extract information from prisoners of war. As is well documented, information from torture such as waterboarding, is notoriously unreliable. Most people will say anything to make torture stop, which most often means they will make up anything. The post 9/11 hope was that this information would make the United States safer from terrorist attacks. It didn’t. But what it did do was make the world a lot more dangerous. Think of the damage done by so willfully stepping off the way of God. Think of the damage done to the souls and psyches of those who did the torturing. Think of the lifelong internal scars of those who were subjected to it. Think of how much it has backfired and destroyed what little peace there was in the world as groups like Al Qaeda, Boko Haram, ISIS, and others use the US’ use of torture as a recruitment tool.

Worship is a major tool in keeping yourself on God’s path, as well as helping to deal with the temptations to bad things for good reasons, or even doing good things for good reasons, but just not God’s way. Worship lays the groundwork for learning to trust God’s love for us, and how God expresses that love for us by guiding and directing us to the best life possible, so that we can be truly free.

***Elements of worship***

Most Mainline churches follow a similar order of worship. Again, culture varies the order to some degree, and sometimes we vary it to allow for a specific experience in worship or simply to change things up. The following are some of the more common elements of worship.

*Unwritten rules*

Typically, when a regular church goer wakes up on Sunday morning, they know exactly what to do to make the most of a worship experience. However, those new to the faith, or new to a congregation, have some catching up to do. Knowing what is expected of worshippers, as well as the structure of the service can help reduce anxiety and allow an individual to have an experience of God during their time in worship. Unfortunately, newcomers are at a slight disadvantage when it comes to knowing the unwritten rules.

Every congregation has its own culture when it comes to things like dress, formality, and most importantly, whether they allow you to take your latte into the sanctuary. Smart congregations will post on-line whether they dress casually or formally; whether the sanctuary is for quiet meditation before the service, or whether people chat it up; plus any other information that a newcomer should know. If they don’t, feel free to call the office mid-week and ask for some information.

*Gathering*

Before the worship service begins, the community has already come together. As the musicians practice, the Sunday School teachers set up, the technical crew put out the microphones and warm up the projectors, the greeters take their place, and others set up chairs and candles, we have already begun to re-form ourselves as a Christian community. In some congregations, as the rest of the community and the newcomers arrive, one is able to grab a cup of coffee and take their place in the seats. Some people will chat, while others prefer to sit in silent prayer or meditation. By the time of the first hymn, the community has gathered and again taken shape as the Body of Christ.

*Music and singing*

Music is a big part of worship. For most, music is a primary way to experience God. Somehow it brings us closer to the Holy. But that doesn’t happen every time or for every person. Each generation has a musical style which beats in their heart. For congregations made up of one or two generations, the choice of musical style is relatively simple. The challenge comes when there are four generations worshipping together. The solemn tones of an organ can put off many young people as easily as the percussive excitement of rock music can turn off many older people. Many churches are experimenting with “blending” the music in an effort to offer something for every musical taste in a widely diverse congregation. This may mean offering both traditional Christian hymns and more modern worship music, or other contemporary songs.

When it comes to singing along, we aim to make everyone feel as comfortable as possible. So, if you’d rather listen than sing, that’s fine. Likewise, if you feel self-conscious because you don’t think you can sing, don’t sweat it – no one will likely hear you or think twice about it. Plus, God thinks your singing is great!

Some churches begin their formal worship time with the singing of two or three short hymns of praise. These are often led by the choir or a small group of singers. This element has been more recently introduced to provide an opportunity to experiment with musical types which may more readily speak to the heart of many in our congregation. Other congregations will move directly into the welcoming time.

*Welcome and announcements*

The Minister/Pastor or worship leader may begin the service with the ancient Christian greeting, “The Lord (or God) be with you.” The congregation calls back, “And also with you.” Next, visitors are welcomed. While many congregations are careful not to single out or ask newcomers to stand, there are still many congregations that continue to do this, not realizing that it is one of the scariest things a newcomer can be asked to do. If this is asked of you, please know that it is all right to smile and refuse. There is time for a few announcements that were either not on the screen or printed in the bulletin. The purpose of this time is to highlight events of importance to the whole community and to provide an opportunity for worshippers to share joys and concerns they may have.

*Communication Sheets*

Early on in the service, you may find “Communication Sheets” circulated through the congregation. Both regular participants and newcomers are invited to fill out the appropriate spaces. Visitors are assured that they won’t be phoned at dinner time (or any time), and no one will show up at their door. This information is used to send a letter of welcome, as well as any other information the newcomer may have requested.

The Communication Sheets also provide very valuable information to the leadership of the congregation. Keeping track of attendance helps us to identify those who have stopped coming to worship. After three or four weeks of absence, members are contacted to see if everything is alright. Often we find that they are experiencing some sort of crisis of which we were unaware. Regular attenders also utilize the sheets to request things like replacement nametags, offering envelopes, or a call from one of the ministry teams.

*Projection*

Many congregations have moved to “paperless” and “heads-up” worship. Part of the reason for this is environmental stewardship. Churches can go through a lot of paper! Another reason is that it allows the use of imagery in the form of still photos or videos, offering another way to help people to worship. Everything you need to know will come up on the big screen as the service progresses, including lyrics to all the songs and anything else the congregation is supposed to say. Singing is also improved since the congregation have their heads up rather than looking down at their hymn books.

*Length of worship*

Expect the worship time to last between 60 and 90 minutes, although every once in a while it may go a little longer.

*Call to Worship/Call to Gather*

The Call to Worship, sometimes known as the Call to Gather, often involving both the congregation and the worship leader, is to remind ourselves why we have decided to come and worship this day.

*Prayer of Approach*

Immediately following the Call to Worship is the Prayer of Approach. This prayer spoken by the worship leader on behalf of the congregation asks God to meet us in worship so that we may have an experience of the Holy and be transformed by the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

*Learning together*

Also known as the “Children’s Time,” this is when the children and youth can experience some worship time that is specifically focused on them. The young people are usually invited to come to the front as they are comfortable.

*Bible readings*

Typically, there will be one or two readings from the Bible each Sunday. In many Mainline churches, these scriptures usually are suggested by the “lectionary,” a three year cycle of readings chosen by the Christian church as a whole. There are occasions when the Preacher will choose another scripture text such as in a sermon series, or to address a particular need or circumstance.

There are dozens of translations of the Bible into English from its original Hebrew and Greek. We find the most scholarly and inclusive version to be the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). In worship we divide the readings into four categories. The first are the “Hebrew Scriptures” also called the “Old Testament.” The next are the Psalms, a collection of poems and songs from ancient Israel that were often used in worship. Another category are the letters written to early Christians and early Christian communities. These are formally known as the “Epistles.” Finally, there are the Gospels, the four books written specifically about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

*Sermon/Reflection on Scripture*

For between 10 and 30 minutes, depending on the preacher, a reflection on one of the Bible readings, or sometimes on a theme related to Christian life, will be shared. We believe that the preacher is not telling you what to believe, but offering one interpretation of that day’s scripture, and inviting each person in the congregation to enter into conversation with God about what it means to them.

*Prayers of the People*

The Prayers of the People is an opportunity for the whole congregation to pray. Typically, one person leads the prayer, sometimes inviting others to offer up specific prayers for individuals or situations. More recently, some churches have tried to find ways for the congregation to be able to pray together and still be able to offer up their individual prayers as well.

Some congregations develop rituals that are unique to their setting. For example at Eagle Ridge United Church in Coquitlam, B.C., following the sermon the Minister/Pastor or Worship Leader lights a candle from the Christ candle and brings it down to three small tables spread throughout the sanctuary. After beginning the prayer time, the Minister/Pastor will open it to everyone else. While quiet music is played, members of the congregation come to a table where they are invited to pray either in silence or aloud, and to light a candle or two. If a person wishes to have the congregation praying for someone or something important to them, they are encouraged to ask for their prayers during the “Life of the Community” time at the beginning of the service.

Most often prayers are spoken for oneself, others, or for something happening in the world, whether they be for God to effect change or to give God thanks for some blessing.

*The Offering*

The Offering is an important act of worship for Christians. It is symbolic of the fact that we believe everything we have comes from the blessings of God. It is also an act of generosity and an important way we can make a difference in the world. The money given goes to support the ministry programs at our church (including salaries) and various programs across Canada and throughout the world to help others. Visitors are not expected to participate in the offering.

It can feel a little awkward passing the plate along without putting anything in it. If you are in a church which still uses this method of collecting the donations, don’t worry if you don’t put something in the plate every week. The counters actually prefer it if you don’t make an offering every week, but do it less frequently. If you really want to get on the counters’ good side, donate by Pre-Authorized Remittance which automatically deducts your offering from your bank account once a month. If you still want to put something in the plate, you can pick up a “I donate through PAR” card and put that in the plate.

Some churches bypass the awkwardness and time used up by passing the collection plate by placing a box near the entrance into which individuals can place their offerings. These churches uniformly report no difference in the amount of money donated.

*Communion*

Roughly once a month, and at least four times a year, Most Mainline churches celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Just as everyone was invited to eat with Jesus, so too is everyone welcome to participate in this sacrament. However, if you are not entirely comfortable or feel like you need to understand this sacrament better, you are perfectly welcome to observe and participate as is right for you.

*Blessing and Sending Forth*

This marks the formal end of worship. The Blessing is the promise that as we work to fulfil our callings as ministers of the gospel, we will have God’s support and presence. The “Sending Forth” reminds us that our mission as disciples of Jesus Christ is to take what we have learned and experienced in worship, back out into the world.

*Coffee time*

Following the service we gather for coffee, tea, and juice. This is a great time to mingle with other folks and catch up. It is also a crucial time to show visitors just how open, welcoming, and nurturing a community we are. Many pastors try to protect the first 15 minutes after the service to greet and chat with newcomers.

***Weekly worship***

A challenge for many people is to worship weekly. Why every week? One reason is that we believe one needs to give God at least a morning a week to counteract all the anti-God messages we get the rest of the week. For instance, if you watch TV you are being bombarded with messages that you are the most important thing on the face of the earth, that your immediate desires are all that count, and that happiness and fulfilment can be purchased.

Another reason is the health of the community. Remember those Sundays when it seemed like everyone was at church? Do you remember the extra energy and the added feeling that God was really on the move that day? It is generally true that in community worship the more people there are, the greater the sense of excitement. It is also true, that every person’s presence in worship is an act of witness. In a society where people ferociously guard their spare time, the very act of getting up and going to church on a Sunday morning is a startling statement of what is truly important in your life. Believe us, people are watching!

So what about those weekends when you are away from your home congregation? We encourage you to go to worship wherever you are. If you are visiting friends and relatives out of town, ask them to take you to their church. And don’t feel like you need to always go to a church of your denomination. Try out others and be open to how the Holy Spirit works within you during that time. You may learn something you didn’t know about them, and something you didn’t know about yourself.