



The Maintenance of Divine Worship

SCRIPTURE:
Isaiah 6: 1-8

September 19, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

We are reflecting on what our spiritual grandparents in our denomination have told us are the great ends of the church. They spent some time reflecting on what the church is for. It's an important question because Christian faith is never something that lives in me; it lives in us. It is something that we share, so the community of Christians is essential for a person to be a follower of Jesus.

Therefore, it's worthwhile to think about these great ends. The ends, or purposes, are great. That doesn't mean that the church is great *at* them.

When we talk about being Christian, it is a circumstance that the theologians describe as already/not yet. We are already Christian now. But at the same time, we are not yet Christian. It is already/not yet. It's not just a statement of growth, as if faith will inevitably mature. It doesn't. Physical growth just happens. There was a time when I was 18 pounds and had no hair and cried all the time. There was a time when I was 138 pounds and had dark brown hair to my shoulders and cried every time a girl broke up with me. Now, all of those things are different. Physical growth just happens. But spiritual growth is something that is pursued through discipline. There is a promised day, and we are living toward that day. It is something toward which we are drawn.

I was in 2nd grade when my parents told me they were going to have another baby. I was not wise about these matters, so I thought they meant it would happen today. They said, "No, not today. It will be after Christmas." Well, it was still September. When you are in 2nd grade and it is still weeks until Halloween, 'after Christmas' may not even get here. They said, "We just wanted you to be prepared." OK,

I'll get right to that.

It wasn't long before a crib showed up in my room. And then they painted my room. One sky-blue wall with clouds, right next to the crib. "What's going on?" I asked. "We just want to be prepared for the baby."

The point is: My brother was coming, so we couldn't go on with business as usual. We didn't know exactly when he would arrive, but because we trusted he was coming, we couldn't go on status quo. Things changed. We were drawn to what was coming. The great ends are like that. They speak of a way of living that we are striving to embrace.

I bring this up today because if there were a great end we might be tempted to assume we have accomplished, it might be this one. The third great end of the church is the maintenance of divine worship. You are here, and we are worshiping, so we must have this down.

Well, let's reflect on worship. What do you want to happen in worship? Why does it matter to you? And then let's ask another question: What might God want from our worship?

Isaiah is in the temple, and in ancient Israel, the temple was believed to be the throne of God, the house of God, the cosmic address of God. And Isaiah has an encounter with God: I saw the Lord high and lifted up. This encounter results in two things: confession and vocation.

Confession: Woe is me. I am lost, a man of unclean lips among a people of unclean lips. I am not who I need to be. There is a different life that is waiting. Not just for me, but for this world. This is Isaiah's confession. Encountering God makes clear the ways we settle and make do.

But Isaiah is not left in his brokenness. Isaiah experiences forgiveness which is sealed in a new

vocation; he has holy work to do. ‘Here am I, send me.’ Worship changed Isaiah’s life.

I have had so many experiences of worship that have changed me. I think about May 23 this year. After 14 months with an empty sanctuary, many of you returned to in-person worship. It was Pentecost, and just being together I felt the spirit of God in the room.

I think of July 30, when we gathered in this sanctuary to bear witness to the resurrection for Dr. Bob. He was a great man, a prophet with courage and even more so, a pastor with tireless grace. It was holy to remember him and all that God has done through this church during the first five decades of life together. And then this choir sang—for the first time in over a year we had a full choir. Hearing them sing made me feel like we were in the presence of angels. God was in the room.

What about you? When have you had an experience where God felt present? Maybe while singing? Music may be God’s favorite language. Or during baptism? Baptism is always holy. Or is there a moment when the beauty of it all left you in wonder?

I imagine you have had such a moment and I imagine there were at least parts of your experience that were like Isaiah’s. That it became an experience that reshaped you in one way or another. It doesn’t happen all the time, certainly not. But sometimes worship give us an experience that changes us.

It’s interesting that the great end does not say the purpose of the church is to *experience* worship. It says the *maintenance* of divine worship. Experiences just come to us. They don’t require maintenance. They don’t require any discipline or attention. Why do you suppose the language is the maintenance of divine worship? Our experience in worship is important, very important, but our experience is not the only important thing that happens here.

There is something else that should be maintained. What does God want to happen here? From God’s perspective, what is the purpose of worship?

James K. A. Smith, in his book *You Are What You Love*, says to know what God wants we need to pay attention to what we want. It’s not always

easy to know. Imagine you came to worship today and found yourself all alone. The choir forgot to show up. I overslept. Dr. Bickers got some gig out of town. The ushers decided that they would just hang out in the Village Cup. It was just you. And what if you came in and sensed God asking: What do you want? What do you really want? What would you answer?

My brother Gene is a fridge watcher. He can stand in front of an opened refrigerator so long that you might think he is using this as a means of air conditioning. “Gene, what do you what?” “Something to eat.” “What do you want to eat?” “I don’t know. I’m looking.”

It’s not always easy to know what we want. It’s not always easy to know what we hunger for. Smith says what defines us as human is our wants, our yearnings, our desires. To say it another way: Who we are is determined by what we love.¹ So, to ask, ‘what do you want?’ is to ask, ‘what do you love?’

But even if we discern what we love, even if we are clear about what we want, the maintenance of divine worship means that we don’t stop there. Worship is about training our hearts to want what God wants. To love what God loves. And I don’t know about you, but I don’t always want what God wants. The truth is, I think the best I can say is that I want to want what God wants. Which is kind of like saying wanting what God wants is something we do already/not yet. Both at the same time.

I think the maintenance of divine worship is the practice of training our hearts to want what God wants. To hunger for what God hungers for. We can learn to love what God loves, but it takes discipline.²

When I was a kid, my breakfast before school was almost always one of two things. I either had Pop Tarts, because I thought that was real food, or we had Lucky Charms. I don’t even know if they make that cereal anymore but it was magically delicious.

When I was in high school and got my first car, a station wagon with wood-grain paneling (I could never figure out who thought that was cool), I drove almost every day to Baskin Robbins Ice Cream and got a mint chocolate-chip milkshake. Every day.

1 James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love* (2016), p. 9.

2 James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love* (2016), p. 18-25.

I loved those. But a person cannot live on sugar alone. In time, I had to repent and change my ways. I learned to eat salads and broccoli. And now, we have kale growing in the garden.

Something happened along the way. I not only changed what I wanted to eat, I changed my understanding of what eating is for. For the first season of my life, eating was about taste. That's what I loved about eating. I loved foods that tasted good and I hated foods that didn't, and that's really all that mattered. But then I became a little more health conscious. I realized that food can also be about nutrition—hence the salads.

But it didn't stop there. Now my favorite meals are not determined by what is on my plate, but by who is at my table. Whether the meal is a Caesar

salad or a three-course feast, the table is ultimately about relationship. I still want it to taste good and I need at least most of what I eat to be healthy. But I have learned that there are deeper things to love at the table. I have grown, through some discipline, and I have matured my tastes to a degree.

What happens here in worship, over and over and over again, is we recite what our life is for. It begins with the things that give us pleasure. In time, we might learn to love those things that give us meaning. But ultimately, the maintenance of divine worship is about learning to love what God loves.

That is what our lives are really for: To love the right things, to love what God loves. And as we deepen our love for the things of God, we are drawn closer and closer to God's promised day.